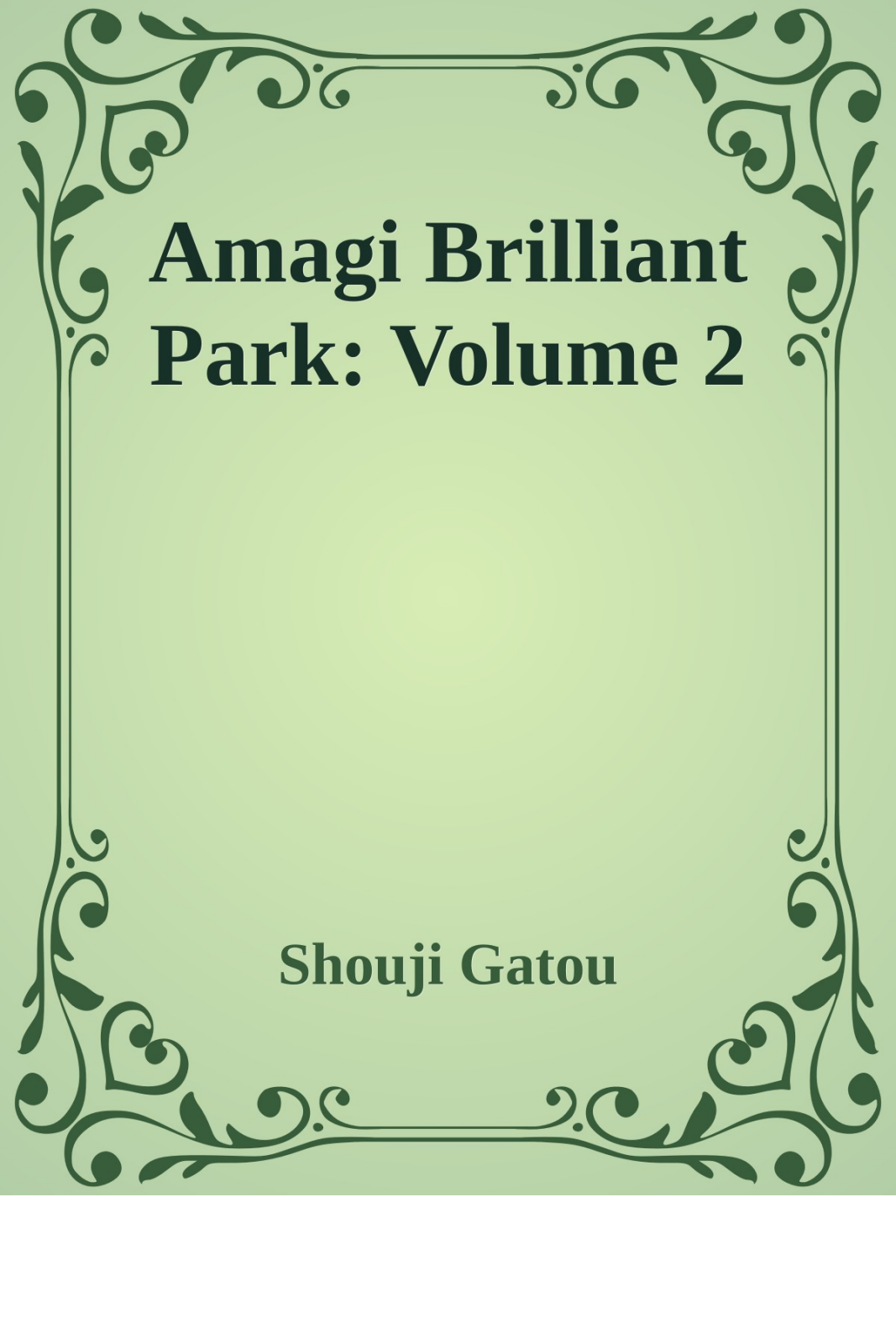


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Amagi Brilliant Park: Volume 2

Shouji Gatou

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

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#

02



Amagi Brilliant Park



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02



**Amagi
Brilliant
Park**





"OOH,
SORRY!
I WAS
JUST IN
SUCH A
HURRY..."



"...WHAT'S
WITH THE
BLOOD
STAIN?"

ONE
OF AMAGI
PARK'S MAIN
PROBLEMS IS
A LACK OF
EMPLOYEES.
THEY QUICKLY
PUT OUT A
CALL FOR
PARTTIME
WORKERS,
BUT...





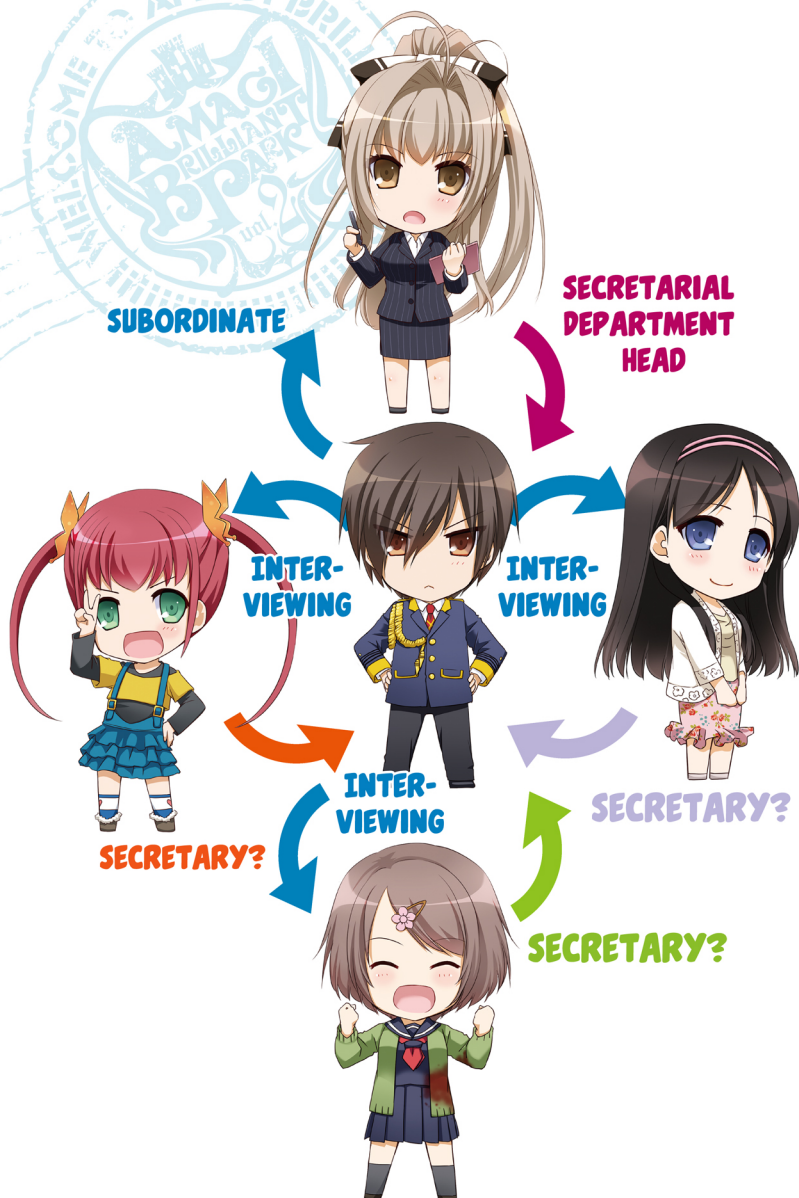
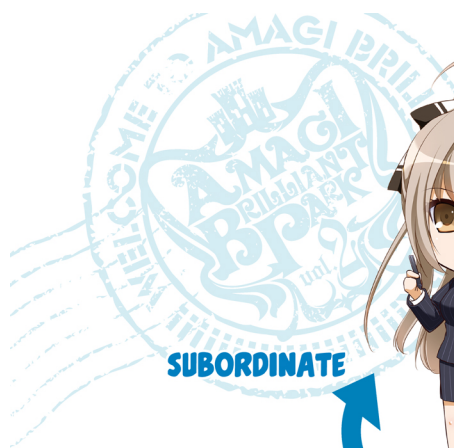


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Prologue

By resorting to arson, he's managed to save an amusement park from being shut down.

That much was fine (though it actually wasn't), but they weren't out of the woods yet.

One month ago, Kanie Seiya had accepted the position of acting manager for Amagi Brilliant Park, an amusement park in western Tokyo. Now it was April, and as he entered his second year of high school, Seiya would have to deal with the many issues he had kicked down the road.

The consequences of their prolonged discount campaign; the drop in attendance as they went back to their usual prices; renewed slacking on the part of the cast, now that the immediate danger was behind them... all kinds of things.

They may have earned themselves another year of relief, but the essential problems still remained. AmaBri was still a crummy amusement park, and if they didn't bring in 600,000 guests by next March, this time, it really would close. Diverting a soccer stadium's worth of guests to the park wasn't going to work a second time; if they wanted to boost attendance, they would have to engage with their problems head-on.

In other words, even though it was only April, they had to get moving right away.

And in the mind of Acting Manager Seiya, their most urgent problem was—

1: Not Enough People!

“Not enough people!” Kanie Seiya shouted to the conference room. It was the first week of April.

The others gathered around the cheap tables were the most crucial members of Amagi Brilliant Park’s cast. They weren’t all old men in suits, either. Many of them were strange creatures, three heads’ tall: plush-bodied rodents, strange dinosaur-like beings with scales and horns—an eclectic lineup of fantastical beings, all wearing dismal expressions. These were “real” mascots that had all come from one magical realm or another to work in this mortal amusement park.

“We don’t have enough people,” Seiya repeated. “Actually, there’s a whole lot we don’t have enough of, but people is high on the list. Maintenance, food prep, clean-up... We need to boost staff in all of those fields!”

While Seiya was riled up and clenching his fists tightly, the others present at the meeting all looked rather apathetic.

“I thought we had enough staff...” the crimson-clad Sento Isuzu murmured.

Isuzu was a member of the royal guard of a magical realm called Maple Land. She had been given the official title “Secretarial Department Head” starting in April.

“We do *not*! Let’s take an example. Sento, you have that lofty-sounding title ‘Secretarial Department Head,’ correct? But how many people are *in* that department? Speak!”

“One.”

“Yes, one! We... well, we probably don’t need more secretaries, but... The point is, we have too many departments being staffed only by one person! And what’s more... Security Chief Okuro!”

“Ah, yes?” Okuro, the security guard, raised his hand when called upon. He was just an ordinary mortal, not from any magical realm. There was another elderly security guard who oversaw the night shift, and in general, the security staff were all mortals.

“How many people are there on the security team?” Seiya demanded.

“Four,” Okuro answered him, “although two of them are part-timers...” On a three-shift system, that meant there would always be exactly one person in the security center at all times.

“Exactly! And that’s *all* the people we have providing security for

a 500,000 square meter territory? It's insane! What if a madman with a kitchen knife went on a rampage onstage? Would you be enough to stop it, Okuro?!"

"Now, don't you worry, Kanie-san," the security guard said reassuringly. "I'd throw my life away to stop any hooligan."

"You'd throw your life away, would you?" Seiya retorted. "And what happens then? While you're lying prone in a sea of blood with a dozen stab wounds, he'll be moving on to the other guests! Idiot!"

"Ah, fair enough!" Okuro sat down, sticking out his tongue (a gesture that was doubly annoying) and rubbing the back of his head self-effacingly.

"No need for concern, Seiya. I'll gladly kill any hooligans that try me, fumo," said Moffle, the cast leader.

Moffle was AmaBri's headlining character. He had a short, stout, plush body like a wombat or a mouse, and wore a stylish hat and bow tie.

"You'd kill them? Really? Can you imagine the headlines the next day?" Seiya suggested. "'Amagi Brilliant Park Headliner Slays Hooligan with Excessive Force.' You really think that'll bring in the guests?"

"It certainly will, fumo," Moffle retorted. "I'd be a hero."

"Your job is to make the guests happy, not to kill people!"

"If you insist, fumo..." Moffle didn't seem convinced, but Seiya decided to move on anyway. "It's not just security," he continued. "We're shorthanded in every single job we have. The onstage cast have been filling in where they can, but the burden negatively affects their performance. It's not sustainable."

"...You're saying we should hire more people?" Isuzu asked him.

"Yes."

"Even though we don't have any money?" she pushed.

"I'm working on that, too," he told her. "...What's with that look? Quit worrying. I really am working on it."

In reality, the plans he had were still vague, but it was important for him to project confidence right now.

"Anyway," Seiya continued, "I've put out an ad for part-timers, and I've gotten quite a few bites. Interviews will start next week, so be ready for that!" he declared resolutely.

"Do you really think we'll get any decent applicants?" Isuzu whispered. It was a serious question with no sarcasm behind it at all.

"I don't know if we will or not," he said firmly, "but we still have to try."

"Well, I suppose..."

That's when the head of the PR department, Tricen, spoke up.

"Kanie-san is quite correct, Isuzu-san. We might get a flood of people

brimming with talent! Like beautiful women, or beautiful women, or even beautiful women! The park will be like the world of a PC game, and the male cast will surely hunch over in appreciation.”

“Stop that,” Seiya said with a snarl. “And don’t lump all PC games together. As a Western gamer, it offends me.”

“Oh, my! Are you one of *those*, Kanie-san...?” Tricen gushed. “I’d assumed you were the closeted type. Acting all hardcore, going to Akiba just for Trader Chaos or PC parts shops... then secretly buying 18+ games off of Amazon.”

“Unfortunately, I think I know the kind of person you’re talking about...” Seiya muttered. “But I’m in high school, anyway. I don’t play 18+ stuff.”

“I beg your utmost pardon,” Tricen apologized. “...But what I was saying is that we might even get applicants who could threaten Isuzu-san’s position as Kanie-san’s beautiful secretary.”

“Ridiculous. Hey, Sento. Tell him off, would you?” Seiya looked at Isuzu in exasperation.

She turned her gaze downward, thought for a moment, and then spoke: “...Well, if the person is more capable than I am, then I would gladly yield my current position.” Her response immediately brought down the mood in the conference room.

No one knew what to say to such a straight-faced response.

Seiya thought about pointing that out, but he decided to just give up with a sigh. This was the kind of person Sento Isuzu was: she couldn’t parse humor. She couldn’t roll with the punches, or give as good as she got.

He’d heard that she was a member of the royal guard for Maple Land, the magical kingdom that built AmaBri. He didn’t know much about what things were like there, but he’d gotten the impression that she was some kind of highly-trained, elite soldier. But, even taking that into account, there were things about her behavior that remained inscrutable...

“Well, anyway,” he said quickly, “Let’s move on to the next subject...”

AmaBri was facing a mountain of problems, after all. Seiya’s next topic was their extremely important (but also extremely boring) budgetary issues.

There was nothing strange about Isuzu’s behavior for the rest of the meeting.

The night after the conference, Sento Isuzu had a strange dream. They were interviewing part-time applicants, and every single one of them was a gorgeous woman. The interviewers were Isuzu and Seiya—for some reason, just them.

The first applicant was a female college student. She was taller than Isuzu, with a motherly face and a voluptuous figure.

"The position I want is to be your secretary," the woman said sweetly to Seiya. "Despite what my appearance may suggest, I have passed the level two secretary proficiency test. I could surely be of use to you in many ways..."

Kanie Seiya leaned forward, eyes shining and intrigued. "I see, I see. You're hired, then. Your 'big sister' charms will comfort me in my darkest moments."

Isuzu attempted to scold Seiya for his flippant decision, but she couldn't. She just flapped her mouth uselessly as no sound emerged from her throat. It was as if she was trying to talk in the vacuum of space.

Seiya stamped "Hired" on her resume. Then, rather than leaving the interview room, the woman rounded the desk and draped herself over his left shoulder.

"Hmm, good," he commented. "I enjoy the pressure of your breast against my shoulder. It feels good. What a high-pressure interview! Bwahahaha!"

"You are wonderful, Kanie-san," she simpered. "Such wit!"

"Cut it out, you're making me blush. Bwahahaha!" He seemed to notice Isuzu's scolding glance, but brushed it off with a grin. "What are you glaring at, Sento? Go on, call in the next one."

Reluctantly, she led the next applicant into the interview room.

The next one was a lively-looking female high school student. She had short chestnut hair, large eyes and a mischievous face. She had an athletic body and—almost obligatorily—a large chest.

"Um... thanks for having me! The position I want is to be your secretary!" she proclaimed boldly, despite her nervous expression. "I-I'm a first degree black belt in secretary certifications! I'm sure I'll be useful!"

Since when did secretary certifications have belt rankings? the dreaming Isuzu wondered.

Isuzu's brow knitted as Seiya gave the high school student's resume a stamp.

"Hired! Now, come here. Let's give those breasts a nice new home! Bwahahaha!"

"Y-Yes sir..." She scampered around the desk and draped herself over Seiya's right side.

"A double high-pressure interview!" he snickered.

"You're so wonderful, Kanie-san," she gushed.

"Such wit!" the first girl chimed in again.

What on Earth is going on? Isuzu wondered. *I want them all to die. I want to go home.*

Seiya, on the other hand, just laughed uproariously, then ordered Isuzu to send in the next applicant.

The next applicant was an elementary school girl. She had long black hair and slender legs and arms. Despite her cherubic appearance, though, her eyes flashed with intelligence.

“The position I want is to be your secretary,” she said, looking down on Seiya and the others with a vaguely sadistic gaze. “I can revitalize this park in ways you incompetents couldn’t dream of. Get it? So hire me right now.”

“Yeah, you’re hired!” he told her. “Now, come sit on my lap!”

“If I must... but just this once.” She, too, rounded the desk to take a seat on Seiya’s lap.

“I like that weight of your lower half!” he leered. “Triple high-pressure interview!”

“You’re so wonderful, Kanie-san!” the second girl told him.

“Such wit!” added the first.

“Really... what a silly boy you are...” chided the new girl.



Seiya laughed uproariously side-by-side with his new secretaries. Isuzu tried to say something about this bizarre situation, but her voice still wouldn't come. While her mouth continued to flap uselessly, Seiya and the three girls turned to glare at her coldly.

"Oh, Sento. Are you still here?" he asked. "As you can see, your services are no longer required. Please leave at once. Go be an attendant to that princess of yours, Latifah—like the faceless extra you are."

This is insufferable, Isuzu fumed. How dare you—

The sound of a shot blasting through the ceiling caused her to open her eyes. In her hands was an ivory musket with ornamental gold trim. Above her was a black bullet hole in the ceiling.

She was in her bedroom in the park's employee dorm. She narrowed her eyes against the bits of plaster that were crumbling down on her.

Ahh, a dream. Of course it was...

Those three beautiful secretary applicants were a fabrication. They were symbols of things she didn't have—of things she would never have, no matter how she struggled.

The idea that he would fawn over them like that was also pure fiction. She'd never seen him behave like that, and she knew very well that he wasn't that kind of man. And yet—

"Mm..." She sat up in bed and put her musket away.

The magical gun Steinberger, handed down through generations of her family, was a magical weapon that had merged with her body and mind. It could be pulled from or stored in any exposed skin on her body. Since her thighs constituted the greatest area of this, it was most efficient to draw it from there, even if that did mean it looked like she was pulling it out of her skirt.

Still, she had never fired her gun in her sleep before, and it was even more annoying to know that she had fired it in anger over a silly dream.

It was a little bit after 6:00 a.m. She felt too alert to go back to bed, for some reason, so she decided to give up on trying. Instead, she got out of bed and took a shower.

If Isuzu didn't get three showers per day, she'd start feeling like she was going to die. She hadn't been exaggerating when she'd said that to Seiya—she really did start to feel like she would die. Of course, she wouldn't *actually* die...

She stripped off her underwear and immersed her naked body in the hot water spray.

Water flowed across her flushed skin and fell off of her in droplets. As she gazed at the ripples the drops created in the tub

below, she thought to herself: *I wonder where that dream came from...*

The answer flickered in the back of her mind. *Dreams like these are often a reflection of your anxieties*, it said. *What am I anxious about, my own insufficiency?* she wondered. It was possible.

I was sent to this park last year to turn things around, yet I accomplished absolutely nothing in the time that I had. I acted like an imperious soldier, which did nothing but make the cast hate me. In the end, it was Kanie Seiya, the mortal chosen by the revelation, who saved the park... and while I was glad for that, it did reflect poorly on me.

Although, that by itself she didn't mind...

I was fully prepared to be relieved of duty and called back to Maple Land. I had been proven insufficient to the task, after all.

Curling up in the bathtub and bathing in the hot water from the shower head, Isuzu continued to think. *I don't think my feelings of insufficiency would be enough to inspire a dream like that... Could I be jealous of Kanie Seiya, then? Regardless of how he did it, in a mere two weeks he brought in a number of guests that we once thought impossible. Am I jealous of his ability?*

No, that wasn't quite right either...

To be quite honest, the main thing she felt for his abilities was admiration. Were she more comfortable with herself, she might have swept him into her arms and thanked him profusely, tears streaming from her eyes.

But she hadn't done that. She couldn't do it.

Why? she pondered. *If I wasn't jealous...*

Then it must be—

No, no, no... She thrust away the answer that presented itself to her, shook her head slightly, then turned off the shower.

I must be going crazy, Isuzu told herself. *I can't be having feelings like that. I just can't.*

For one thing, he'd laugh at me. Everyone in the park would laugh at me, she repeated to herself, as she wiped down with a clean towel.

Then, as was her usual practice, she put her stockings on first. Her underwear would go on after. This was just how she had done it since she was little; there was no particular reason for it.

It reminded her of the incident at his apartment. She had gotten out of the bath and was dressing herself as she was doing now, when he just happened to step into the dressing room.

In that moment, she had applied what she believed was known in the mortal world as a “poker face.” What else could she do?

Isuzu had pretended that she was perfectly calm, but of course, she wasn't. She just had a personality that allowed her to appear more cool-headed the greater the emergency she found herself in. Even if bombs were going off nearby, she would always remain the perfect

image of calm.

After putting on her underwear and using a dryer on her lustrous hair, she brushed her teeth, and then peered into the mirror. She tried a smile, then tried crying.

There was slight movement around the corners of her eyes and mouth, but in general, her face maintained its usual indifference. Isuzu had always had a hard time expressing even the slightest emotion.

She put on her more-or-less obligatory lip gloss, then tried puckering her lips; this time it worked. There was something a bit sexy about it.

Isuzu tried to do it again, putting in all her effort, but this time she failed. Her lips just twisted awkwardly, then ended up in a scowl.

The food served at AmaBri's employee cafeteria, AM, was extremely bad.

Nobody knew why the cafeteria was known as AM. It offered three specials—which hadn't changed once in the three years she'd been there—as well as foul-smelling gyudon, dry napolitan spaghetti, and chicken curry.

The chicken curry was the worst of the lot. It was full of tough carrots and onions; the chicken wasn't cooked all the way through; and, perhaps because they used cheap curry powder, it had a strange funk to it.

It was honestly hard to make a curry that tasted bad, yet as if through some kind of anti-miracle, AM had achieved this terrible curry. Isuzu sometimes wondered if selling it onstage and advertising it as "Amagi Brilliant Park presents the world's worst curry" might be a draw.

That morning, as punishment for allowing herself to have such a stupid dream and lose her cool, Isuzu was buying a ticket for that chicken curry. (At least, that's what she told herself—in fact, its low 240 yen price point may have played a greater role.)

"Wow, someone's actually buying the curry, ron."

As she took her 260 yen in change from the ticket machine, Isuzu heard a voice from behind her.

It was the Fairy of Music, Macaron.

He was a white, fluffy, adorable sheep mascot who stood 2.5 heads tall. He was a long-time member of the cast, and he ran Macaron's Music Theater, an attraction in AmaBri's Sorcerer's Hill area.

"Good morning, Macaron," she greeted him.

"Morning, ron. Isuzu-chan, I have to ask... are you really gonna eat the curry here, ron?"

“...It’s cheap,” she responded. “There’s a philosophical reason behind it as well.”

“I... I see. But be careful, ron. Wanipii ate it once and he erupted... from both ends, if you know what I mean. He ended up spending a few days in Amagi Hospital, getting his fluids through an IV.”

Isuzu wondered: *If it really had been that bad, why hadn’t the infirmary tried to trace it back to its point of origin?* But instead of responding, she just walked away from the ticket machine.

She traded her ticket for the curry in question, put it on a tray, and then moved to take a seat. It was morning, so nearly all the seats were filled, mostly by cast members who lived in the park’s dorms.

Isuzu lived in the girls’ dorm, so she ate here twice per day, in the morning and the evening. Macaron must live in the boys’ dormitory too, then, she realized. Even though his usual compatriots, like Moffle and Tiramii, tended to rent cheap apartments outside the park.

Everyone in the cast had their own situations, though. She saw no reason to pry into his personal affairs.

“Can I sit here, ron?” Macaron wandered into the seat across from Isuzu. It seemed natural, given the lack of seats around them, so she nodded.

Macaron had chosen the baked fish special, which was one of the more edible options the cafeteria offered. If it hadn’t been for that ridiculous dream this morning, she might have chosen the fish, too. Although its 480 yen price point, versus the curry’s 240 yen, was further inspiration for her to choose the latter.

Pathetic, she thought. *For a member of Magical Realm Maple Land’s elite royal guard to seriously choose between 240 yen curry and 480 yen fish...*

“This is the first time we’ve ever talked over breakfast, ron,” Macaron said.

“I see,” said Isuzu.

“You always eat alone. You’ve got this real aura of unapproachability, ron.”

“Ah.”

“Well, it was reasonable enough, given your position, ron.”

“You may be right,” Isuzu agreed.

Last year, Isuzu’s position at AmaBri had been something close to acting manager. Prior to that, she’d been a soldier in Maple Land’s royal guard. In a way, she was like the archetypal elite young bureaucrat taken out of the central office and dispatched to a remote outpost. She hadn’t been welcome here, and it had been difficult to get results.

The camaraderie among AmaBri’s staff was surprisingly strong, given how lousy the park itself was, yet Isuzu had remained isolated

among them.

“Am I bothering you? Sorry if I am, ron.”

Isuzu’s responses remained perfunctory, so Macaron stopped trying to engage and just went back to eating, scarfing down his amberjack fillet and slurping his miso soup.

Isuzu wasn’t trying to be cold to him; she was just never sure how to respond to comments like his, or how to enrich a conversation. It had been that way in the Maple Land guard, too.

She wasn’t trying to turn others away, but that always seemed to be the end result, regardless. A cold, inflexible, domineering woman who would gladly strong-arm others to get her way—that was how everyone seemed to see her, and the people here were no different.

She was always wishing she could handle things a little better, but things never seemed to improve.

Silently, she brought a spoonful of curry to her mouth. As expected, it was undercooked, it had an aftertaste, and it was all-around awful.

“Isuzu-chan,” Macaron said. “If it’s gross, you should say that, ron. Honesty is good for the soul.”

She should have just admitted it, but instead, with her expression firmly locked in indifference, she simply whispered: “Perhaps.”

“There you go again, ron.” Macaron let out a low, thoughtful bleat. “I used to think you were being distant because you were our acting manager... is it a communication disorder? Do you have a communication disorder, ron?”

She was startled by the personal nature of his question. Before she could respond, though, he thrust his hoof forward to stop her.

“I suspect you’re the type who thinks so much that you end up forgetting to talk, ron. You should really work on that, ron.”

“.....” Isuzu waffled over whether or not to tell him to mind his own business; his advice was sensible enough, but it wasn’t something she wanted to hear first thing in the morning.

She and Macaron were not especially close, either. *On the other hand*, she pondered, *maybe he’s just trying to be considerate?* It would hardly be wise to shoot down his kindness and further deplete her work relationships. Then again, if she permitted this now, would that just give him license to presume upon her even more?

For lack of any better response, she just ended up saying: “I suppose so.”

Macaron seemed openly disappointed with yet another perfunctory reaction. “That’s not nice, ron. I’m just saying this because I’m worried about you. ...Hey, it’s Kanie-kun.”

“.....?” Prompted by his words, Isuzu looked in the direction of the cafeteria door. No one was there; it was just some anonymous cast

member on his way out.

She turned back to Macaron. For some reason, he was sitting up very straight, looking off in the distance, whistling innocently. “My mistake, ron.”

“...I see.” Though dubious about his strange behavior, she brought another spoonful of disgusting curry to her mouth. Her teeth crunched down on something hard, but assuming it must just be some dried-out rice, she decided to swallow it down. She followed it up with a drink of water, then resumed her ordeal under Macaron’s careful watch.

What she couldn’t see was that, under the table, Macaron had clenched his hoof in triumph as he mouthed a very soft “yes!”

It was a weekday, so Isuzu’s next stop was Amagi High School, in the city. She’d originally transferred to the school to recruit Kanie Seiya, so presumably, her task was now over. But her lady, Latifah Fleuranza, the manager of AmaBri, had told her this:

“Kanie Seiya-sama is our savior. It is our duty to see that he wants for nothing, even in his education. From now on, you must remain by his side for as much of the day as you can.”

Latifah had lost her memory at the end of the school year, so she couldn’t have personally known about the struggles that Seiya had been through in March. But when the princess of Maple Land told her to do something, Isuzu could hardly refuse. Thus, she had reluctantly resumed attendance at Amagi High School, this time as a second-year student.

The strangeness first began when a girl from her class addressed her in the hallway: “Morning, Sento-san. You’re looking pretty down.”

Isuzu had talked to this person a few times since the new term started. She was a bit of a leading figure among the girls, and even looked after the students who didn’t really fit in. Her greeting Isuzu was an extension of that role.

Normally, Isuzu would just say “I don’t think I am,” and end the conversation. But this morning, her reply came immediately: “Yes, I am down. I had a bad dream, I ate awful curry, and I had to endure a co-worker’s unsolicited advice. Nothing at work is going well, the cast is all slacking off, and I can’t stop worrying that we won’t meet our attendance quota this year.” She got that far, then forced her mouth shut.

The girl stared in disbelief at Isuzu’s sudden, involuntary logorrhea. “Oh... I see. That sounds rough.”

“It is rough. My successor, Kanie-kun, is a brilliant person for better or worse. I’m not jealous of his abilities, of course, but I’m in a position where I’m supposed to be supporting him, and I’m not sure I’m doing what’s expected of me. I also have no faith in myself. So—”

Isuzu clamped her hands over her mouth to force an end to the stream of words spilling from it.

What on earth am I talking about? she wondered. *Babbling on about my work troubles to someone I barely even know... I've never done anything like this before.*

"Um, I don't really know what you're talking about, but..."

"You're a mortal, of course, so it's none of your business. Please, forget everything I said. If you don't, I'll have to use my magical gun Steinberger to—*mmph!*" Isuzu seized her out-of-control jaw in both hands and held it forcibly shut.

"U-Um? Sento-san?" the girl ventured.

"Mm... ah. Sorry," Isuzu managed to squeeze out, then did an about-face and ran away.



"By the way, Macaron," Tiramii said, as they took a break from morning dance practice. "How are things going with those druth nuts I gave you, mii?"

They were backstage in the No. 2 Building. This was a three-story structure mainly used for parade and show dance rehearsals. The room in which they were practicing now was about the size of a school classroom, and it had one wall covered in mirrors.

Tiramii and Macaron were taking a short break, while Moffle gave performance tips to the male and female background dancers they'd hired from a local theater company.

"One, two! One, two! Okay, now turn, fumo!" Moffle was clapping his paws as he barked out instructions to the dancers. "One, two! One, two! You, there! You're late again! Why are you always late? You're gonna let down the audience, fumo!"

Not enough people and not enough funding. As a result of these troubles, Moffle had been pulling double duty as AmaBri's choreographer and stage producer for a while now. It was the kind of situation that would usually lead to a quick crash and burn, but Moffle had proven himself surprisingly capable at this particular job.

"Got it, fumo?! When one comes, you need to already be getting ready for two. Let's do it slow. One... now, two... You get it now? Let's try it one more time, fumo. Turn back... okay, one! Now on the ground... now, two!"

The dancers moved awkwardly, but in unison.

"Yes, yes, yes! Much better, fumo! Now, let's speed it up, bit by bit. Okay, one, two... Yes, okay! One, two! ...Yes, great, fumo!"

Watching Moffle and the practicing dancers from afar, Tiramii and Macaron chuckled.

"Has Moffle... changed, mii?"

“Well... he does seem a bit kinder in his teachings than before, ron.”

In the past, he'd been much less sociable. “Why can't you get it right, fumo?! You're all hacks, fumo!” he would shout, heaping the hired dancers with abuse and bringing down the whole mood of the theater.

But now that the park's life had been extended by another year, he could probably relax and afford to be kinder to the dancers.

“Anyway, back to the subject, mii. Macaron, what did you do with the druth nuts, mii?” Tiramii asked again.

Macaron gave a thoughtful bleat, gazing into the distance. “Ahh, the druth nuts? I tried one out this morning, ron.”

“Oh-ho...” Tiramii chortled.

“I was afraid to try them myself,” Macaron admitted, “so I slipped one into Isuzu-chan's curry.”

“How devilish of you, mii.” Tiramii grinned. He knew very well what it did.

Druth nuts were a mysterious, magical breed of nut that grew in the mountains behind Tiramii's childhood home. They caused those who ate them to immediately answer any question with the complete, unvarnished truth. How long the effect lasted would vary by individual, but it could range from a few hours to half a day. Incidentally, they had a very distinct flavor, and could be delicious when simmered with chicken, onions, sugar, and soy sauce (though it wasn't recommended that you eat the dish with people you don't get along with).

“No need to worry, ron. Druth nuts are legal.”

“...Macaron. I gave you those nuts so that you could learn how your ex and your daughter really feel about you, mii. I didn't give them to you to play mean pranks on Isuzu-chan, mii.”

“I know! I just wanted to test its effectiveness, ron. Unfortunately, Isuzu-chan ended up going to school instead...”

“That's too bad, mii. I'd have asked her how many times she jasterboots a week.”

“Jasterboot” was a Maple Land term for a certain act. We won't go into details here, but it wasn't anything you would discuss in polite company. It was related to a certain Maple Land insult—“go puff yourself!”—but we'll leave out the details of exactly what that means, as well.

“If you asked her that, she'd definitely kill you later, ron.”

“No need to worry,” came a voice. “I'll kill you right now.”

They turned around to see Isuzu standing there. She was dressed in her Amagi High School uniform, with her usual musket in hand. Her expression looked blank, at first, but her eyes were burning bright

with rage.

“Ohh...” they both wailed.

She started firing. Both were assailed, again and again, with a pain four times as bad as stubbing your little toe on a dresser.

Kanie Seiya hadn't gone to school that day, so he'd been in his AmaBri office since that morning.

He was having a disheartening meeting with Ashe, the head of the accounting department. He had heard an acerbic run-down on their dry (yet despair-inducing) numbers and he was now patiently engaging in discussion with her about how to balance the accounts from now on.

“In summary... sir,” Ashe said.

Other than her pointed ears, horns, brown skin, and slightly demonic features, she looked like an ordinary girl in her twenties, with ample curves held rigidly in place beneath a rather ordinary suit. Seiya had heard that she came from a magical realm besides Maple Land, but that was all he knew about her—that, and the fact that she'd nearly killed Tiramii after he sexually harassed her (in an incident that convinced even that incorrigible mascot to finally lay off).

He also knew that she'd been in charge of AmaBri's accounts for many years. The fact that the place had remained afloat all this time made it clear that she was one of the park's secret heroes.

“The 30 yen campaign last month was a bad blow,” she continued. “We managed to get past the attendance issue, but our budget is in bad shape. If nothing changes, we're going to start having trouble with our cash flow.”

“Well... that figures,” Seiya murmured blackly.

“We're on the verge of bouncing checks,” she admitted. “The only way to survive would be to free up funding with major lay-offs.”

“Not possible,” Seiya sighed. “We're short-handed as it is. Could we get Maple Bank to bail us out?”

Maple Bank was the bank of the magical realm of Maple Land. It was one of the organizations in favor of keeping the park open—naturally enough, since the survival of their princess, Latifah, depended on the park's continued existence...

“No, they can't,” Ashe sighed.

“Why not?”

“The effects of Japan's monetary easing strategy, politically motivated personnel reforms in the Maple Land court, the American Federal Reserve's new policies clamping down on magical realm banks... it's quite complicated, shall I continue?”

“No, you'll bore the readers.”

“Very well. The point is, we can't ask the bank.”

“Okay.” Seiya took her at her word. “Anyway, try to get us through this month, at least. I’m cooking up a last resort method for raising funds.”

“Are you going to rob a bank this time?” she inquired.

Seiya shot Ashe a sharp glance at that. *She’s a smart person*, he realized. *She must have figured out what caused that fire at Kajinomoto Stadium last month; the fact that she’d said “this time” is evidence of that.*

“I don’t mean this as a criticism,” she said, as if choosing her words carefully. “I want to keep this park in business as much as you do. But I don’t want you to do anything too reckless.”

“...I appreciate the sentiment,” Seiya said at last, “but I can’t make any promises. Though bank robbery is off the table, at least.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Ashe told him.

Just then, the phone on his desk rang. Seiya picked it up; it was their head of security, Okuro. “What’s wrong?” Seiya asked.

“Oh, Kanie-san,” said Okuro. “Er, the truth is, well... in the No. 2 Building just now, Sento-san, Macaron-san, and Tiramii-san got into a huge fight...”

“The three of them?”

“Well, it’s more that Macaron and Tiramii are running in terror while Sento-san tries to kill them,” Okuro admitted. “Do you think you could come put a stop to it?”

Seiya ran to the No. 2 Building, but the chaos was all wrapped up by the time he arrived.

Macaron and Tiramii were dead.

Well, they weren’t *actually* dead, but they looked close enough to it: Macaron was motionless, radial fractures emanating out from the place where his head had gone through the mirror. Tiramii lay prone on the ground, having written “the killer was a titty monster” in blood on the floor beside him.

Isuzu stood at the center of the practice area, shoulders heaving, and breathing raggedly. The hired dancers were huddled in a corner of the room, trembling.

“...I thought you were practicing for the parade,” Seiya said accusingly. “Where’s Moffle?”

“I don’t rightly know. I’m told he noticed the commotion and tried to stop it, but... ah, I see him. Over there,” security chief Okuro said, as he glanced out a broken window. Moffle was dangling from a branch of one of the cherry trees outside, and appeared to be unconscious.



“..... So, what happened here?” Seiya asked, knowing full well that the three of them must have been teasing Isuzu again.

“Payback...” came Isuzu’s immediate response. “They fed me a druth nut, and they were plotting to ask me vulgar questions...”

“Vulgar questions?” he inquired.

“Like how many times a week I jaster—*hmmmmmmgh!!*” Isuzu clamped her mouth shut and pinched her nose. She looked like she was trying to pop her ears.

“Sento...?” Seiya looked concerned.

“I-I’m fine...” she heaved. “I went to school today. Though it seemed pointless at first to go without you, I decided that I should at least earn some attendance days. And I felt awkward about seeing you after the strange dream that I—*hmmmmmmgh!*”

“.....? Look, whatever. I’m just glad the mess was kept backstage,” Seiya told her. “It would be a disaster if the guests had seen it. Now, wake up those idiots, then head for the administration building. Interviews start at 1:00 pm.”

“I-Interviews?!” Isuzu went ramrod straight, her eyes wide.

“What, do you have a problem with that?”

“Yes, I do have a problem with that,” Isuzu blurted out. “I’m spilling out everything on my mind, right now. I don’t know what I might say during an interview. I might disclose the park’s money troubles, or its horrible working conditions, or any number of other things that would discourage the applicants. And then there’s the strange feelings I seem to have developed for—*hmmmmmmgh!*” She trailed off into a strange moaning noise as she covered her nose and mouth again with all her strength.

“...Are you okay?” Seiya asked, after a while.

“No, I am not okay,” Isuzu managed to say. “I need sick leave. I need to go home and go to bed. I’m going to end up causing trouble for you if I don’t. Not as the mortal chosen by the revelation, but as someone that I—*hmmmmmmgh!*”

“What the hell is that ‘hmmgh’ thing you keep doing?” he wanted to know.

“I’m telling you, the druth nut—*hmmmmmmgh!!*”

This is nonsense, Seiya thought. Deciding it must be some form of hay fever, he turned, then started to walk away. “I’m not going to give you sick leave for a little backstage tantrum. Don’t be late, all right?”

“But you must let me take leave—” Isuzu protested.

“No,” he said firmly. “Besides, you’re the one who screened the applicants. We can’t do the interviews without you.”

“But—”

“Enough! You have to be there! If you try to skip out, you’re

fired!" he fumed. "Fired!" Seiya strode swiftly out the door.

Even during brief breaks like these, Seiya was constantly monitoring the state of the park: Last week, he'd routed the feed from the security cameras to display on his laptop via LAN. The security center crew were unanimously technologically illiterate, so Seiya had had to handle the access settings and such himself. He had been hoping to find a way to access the cameras from anywhere—as in, at school and from home—but his attempts kept resulting in strange errors he couldn't fix, and after realizing he couldn't guarantee security on his smartphone browser, he eventually gave it up. Seiya wished he could have just one engineer to handle basic tasks like these, but of course, they didn't have the funds to hire one.

It was a weekday, so the cameras showed a nearly deserted park. This was understandable, of course—every amusement park in Japan faced a slump at this time in April—but the cast all seemed to be slacking off, too. He had to do something about this quickly. Within the next few days, if possible...

"I guess reaching out to those senior organizations was a good choice," Seiya muttered to Moffle after lunch was over. They'd run into each other in the hall at the administration building, and had started up a conversation.

"Moffu. Well... I can't say you're wrong, fumo."

Although he'd been knocked out during the brawl earlier, Moffle's wounds seemed to be minor. He'd rested up in the health center for thirty minutes. Then, after eating some snack croquettes (his favorite food), he had risen like the Phoenix and hurried to the administration building to serve on the interview panel.

"It's true that a lot of our guests lately have been old-timers, fumo," Moffle admitted in an unhappy whisper.

During this period—right after the new school term started but before Golden Week began—students and professionals were mainly focused on adjusting to their new schedules. Not many of them were able to go out with friends and family, especially if it meant rocking the boat by taking a weekday off to play around. Therefore, the most likely weekday customers for this time of year were people who didn't like waiting in line. (Incidentally, you can even get into a certain whip-wielding archaeologist's attraction with less than a five-minute wait during this period—although some say this hasn't been the case lately, so be careful.)

Because of this, Seiya had decided to go after seniors; the people most unfettered by the shackles of the new fiscal year.

Last month—right after he'd decided to stay on as acting manager,

following the events of March—Seiya had started pushing their services to senior organizations and old folks' homes. He gave out coupons, established group discounts, and had the snack corners prepare mild rice ball flavors, miso soup, warabimochi and houjicha.

As a result, AmaBri was maintaining higher numbers than it usually did during the April dry spell, though it was coming nowhere near the numbers they had achieved during their 30 yen campaign in March.

“Seniors are still guests,” Seiya said adamantly. “Stop grumbling and be grateful.”

“I know I should, fumo,” Moffle admitted. “But, it’s just... it’s so hard to have a conversation with them.”

“Yeah...” Seiya could certainly sympathize there.

Last year, during summer vacation, he had taken a solo trip to Gunma to do some wandering. At a bus station in an obscure hot springs town, he’d gotten into a conversation with an old woman that had gone absolutely nowhere. He’d say “I came here from Tokyo,” and she’d say “My, that’s a fine profession.” He’d say “I hear this village is going to be submerged when they build the dam,” and she’d say, shyly, “Oh, you flirt...” They were just talking over each other. Why was it so hard for the young and the old to reach an understanding?

“It’d be one thing if it was just a communication issue. They also complain a lot, fumo. They stumble once at an attraction, and it’s all ‘I nearly died; you’ll pay for this.’ We’ve had a few lawsuits filed over minor sprains, fumo.”

“Hmm...” Seiya pondered the conundrum.

“Then, there are the old perverts who see Muse dancing around in that costume of hers, tell her to come over and start putting the moves on her, fumo. They throw their cigarette butts on the ground; they cut in line. The elderly these days are out of control, fumo.”

“Oh, really?” Seiya was intrigued despite himself.

“Now, there are decent seniors out there too, fumo. But I tell you from experience: old people these days are up to no good. Particularly those baby boomers—”

“All right, that’s enough. Stop now.” Seiya waved his hand, stopping Moffle before he could say anything too controversial.

“All right, fumo. ...So? What department are we interviewing for today?”

“All of them.”

“Moffu?”

“I put out want ads for each sector, but I got fewer applicants than I was hoping for,” Seiya explained. “So while I’d planned to do interviews over three days... we only got enough to fill one day.”

“That’s disappointing, fumo.”

“C’m on, don’t let that be what gets you down,” Seiya said. “We’ll keep the want ads up through next week, too.”

The interviews were to be held in the 3rd conference room on the third floor of the administration building. Seiya and Moffle took their seats facing away from the window, then spread out the copies of resumes that Isuzu had sent them. Isuzu entered a bit later; she was wearing a plain dark gray suit jacket with a tight skirt.

“You’re late, Sento,” said Seiya.

“I took a shower and changed my clothes. I decided that I should wear something secretarial, and I wasted ten minutes debating what that should be. More specifically, I was uncertain as to whether I should wear pants, or whether I should show off my legs with a tight miniskirt. I decided to go with the miniskirt; not for the applicants, but to invite your—*hmmmmngh!!!*” Isuzu clamped a hand over her mouth and pitched forward.

“Again with the ‘hmmgh,’” he observed. “Seriously, what’s with you today?”

“K-Kanie-kun. Are you actually going to play out the obtuse love interest character tro—*hmmmmngh!!*”

“...? Ah, forget it. Do whatever you want.” Seiya looked at his watch, then clapped his hands together. “Okay, let’s get started. Call in the first applicant.”

A waiting member of the general affairs department cast nodded and left the conference room.

Seiya, Moffle, and Isuzu—two high school students and one mascot—were the ones running the interviews. It made for an odd-looking panel, but they didn’t have much of a choice. They really were the park’s most central figures.

“That reminds me...” Seiya began. “Moffle?”

“Yeah?” the mascot replied.

“Where’s that Lalapatch thing of yours?”

“Ah... I forgot it, fumo.”

“Hey!”

“I left it in my locker, fumo. Should I go and get it?”

The Lalapatch Charm was a mysterious magic item issued to the employees of AmaBri. It was a silver talisman about the size of a 500 yen coin, inscribed with the bust of a goddess. When residents of magical realms wore it, those around them would perceive them as ordinary mortals. As incredible as that was, it wasn’t actually a rare, difficult-to-find artifact; it was a basic consumer good, regularly sold at magical realm department stores. The cheapest of them cost the equivalent of about 980 yen, but these were manufactured in Chinese magical realms (whatever that meant) and had a tendency to explode from time to time. They were advised not to use those.

“We’re supposed to be running interviews,” Seiya said exasperatedly. “How are they going to take us seriously when we’re two high schoolers and a weird guy in a costume?”

“Ah, well, I wouldn’t worry, fumo. They’ll get used to it.”

“Hmm, I suppose, but...”

“We don’t have time, anyway. Let’s just get going, fumo.”

“I hope this will be all right...” Seiya worried.

While they were still talking, the conference room door opened; the person who entered was a college student with an easygoing air around her.

“Thank you very much for having me.” The woman gave a well-mannered bow, then sat down in the folding chair as directed.

She had long hair and eyes that drooped slightly at the corners, Seiya observed. She was wearing a rather ill-fitting suit that she probably hadn’t worn often; she had chosen a jacket one size too big to cover her ample bust, which resulted in odd wrinkles around her waist and arms.

She didn’t appear to be nervous, and had a pleasantly subdued smile. *Plus two points*, Seiya thought.

She didn’t seem particularly perturbed that one of her interviewers was a plush costumed creature, either. Completely unflappable? *Plus one point*, he decided again.

Moffle folded his arms and reclined. Isuzu was looking at the floor for some reason and blinking rapidly, as if she’d received some great shock. Seiya heard her whisper something like “Is my dream coming true?” but he didn’t know what she was talking about, so he just let it go.

“So, ah... Adachi Eiko-san,” Seiya said, looking back over her resume. It seemed he was the one who would be handling most of the questioning. “Thank you for applying to be part of our cast.”

“Oh, not at all,” she replied. “I’m the one who’s grateful.”

After this slightly silly exchange, Seiya looked at how she’d filled in her preferred departments. “So... your first choice was attraction cast, I see, and your second choice was entrance cast. Those are both important posts with a lot of guest interactions. Have you done work like this before?”

“Yes,” she affirmed. “I was with a talent agency until just last month.”

“Oh? And what agency would that be?”

“I’m sure you haven’t heard of them... they’re called Quattro Productions,” Eiko explained.

She was right; he hadn’t heard of them. Of course, there were hundreds of talent agencies out there; it was probably some kind of escort or model service. The agency had either failed to find her good

jobs, or she wasn't getting enough requests and they didn't renew her contract. Either way, she'd gone back to being an ordinary person. It was a common enough situation.

Although if she was feeling touchy about it, there was a chance she might get into fights with her co-workers. *Minus one point*, Seiya decided.

"Er, well, it sounds like you haven't heard of them," Eiko-san said with a giggle. It didn't sound like a self-deprecating laugh; she just seemed to be trying to smooth things over after perceiving that he wasn't sure how to respond. She was solicitous, then. *Another plus two points*, he thought, bumping up her score.

"Ah, forgive me. I'm not well educated in that field," Seiya apologized. "Just what kind of agency are they? Modeling, escorts..."

"Ah. They produce videos, actually," Eiko told him.

"Oh?" he asked. "Videos, eh? What kind?"

With a mild-mannered smile, she responded: "They were AVs."

".....what?"

".....er?"

".....fumo?"

"AVs," Eiko said again.

There was a prolonged silence. All three interviewers scooted back simultaneously, their chairs clattering from the force. Eiko-san remained as serene as ever.

"Um..." Seiya stuttered. "Th-th-that is an... i-i-impressive l-line of work... r-r-really... impressive..."

"Thank you," Eiko said with a beaming smile.

"W-W-Well... er..." he floundered, "J-j-just to be sure, y-you did say... AVs?"

"Yes," she affirmed. "I made about ten of them."

"T-Ten?!" Despite his long history as an actor, Seiya couldn't keep his mouth from gaping, nor his voice from cracking. *What?* he thought incredulously. *Is she serious?*

AVs? Not "advanced vehicles," right? This sweet young lady, with her mysterious aura that makes even *me* feel warm and fuzzy inside? This prim and polished "big sister next door" type that every man has fantasized about at least once in his life? *No way*, thought Seiya.

A woman like her. Making *those* kinds of videos?

Impossible, he told himself. *It just can't be. What is wrong with this universe?!* Seiya could feel his worldview crumbling to pieces around him.

Isuzu had frozen up, her eyes wide as saucers, while Moffle poked Seiya in the side with his paw and hissed in a low whisper: "Seiya... Seiya!"

"Wh-What?" Seiya whispered back.

“Ask her stage name, fumo. I’m curious, fumo.”

“I can’t ask her that!” Seiya responded in a strangled voice. He then returned to his senses and gave Eiko-san a stiff smile. “Y-Yes, um... forgive me. Th-That is quite a-an unusual history... it c-c-caught me a little bit off g-guard...”

“I see,” she said apologetically. “I hear that quite often...” This time, there was a faint sorrow in her smile. That expression was trouble; there was something vaguely erotic about the vulnerability it projected. It inspired a faint desire to protect her, and then to ask for various things in exchange. “Oh, but don’t worry... I’m used to it.”

“Th-Thank you,” Seiya replied.

Then he heard Moffle whisper in his ear again: “Seiya.”

“Wh-What?!”

“Get a grip, fumo. You’re the interviewer. Don’t thank her, fumo!”

“B-But...” Seiya tried to defend himself.

“You need to push her on this, fumo,” Moffle advised him urgently. “Get her name and debut work already, fumo!”

“You shut up!” Even so, Seiya didn’t know what to ask her next; anything that he needed to know for work could easily be interpreted as sexual harassment. For instance...

Example one:

“So you’re in college right now, right?”

→ “And what do your classmates think of you, eh? I bet they’re always undressing you with their eyes... Heh heh heh...”

Example two:

“Your wage starts at 750 yen while you’re training, is that all right?”

→ “I know it sounds low, but I bet you could earn a few bonuses here and there... Heh heh heh...”

Example three:

“Do you enjoy riding horses?”

→ “Yeah, baby. I bet you like to ‘ride,’ don’t you? I’m a stallion myself. Want to go on a run some time? Heh heh heh.”

Dammit! he thought. *I’m completely locked down!* A single bead of sweat trailed down Seiya’s temple.

Eiko-san continued to wait, calmly, for his next question. Time passed in awkward silence.

What should I do? I—I know, I’ll let Sento Isuzu handle it, Seiya decided. *She’s a woman, she’s always composed, and she’ll ask all the right questions in defiance of the stupid men around her.* He turned to look over at Isuzu.

“.....” Her face was pale, her hand clamped over her mouth, her shoulders trembling.

“S-Sento?” he began cautiously.

“...hmmmmgh!” She looked up, removed her hand, opened her mouth wide as if to speak... then shut her eyes tightly, grabbed Seiya’s ear, and dragged him roughly toward her.

“Ow!” he objected. “Hey, what are you—”

Her lips were close enough to bite his earlobe, and he could feel her breath on his neck as she whispered to him, urgently: “Kanie-kun. Do not ask me for aid. I’m struggling more than you are right now, for the following three reasons: One, she looks exactly like an applicant I saw in my dream this morning. Two, you seem surprisingly fond of her. Three, when she brought up her history, you were shaken more badly than I’ve ever seen you before!”

“Wh-What?” he whispered back.

“I’d rather not say any more than that, but I still seem to be under the influence of the druth nut, so it appears that I’ll have to. I thought of you as a competent man who wasn’t easily shaken, and seeing you go weak in the knees over a large-breasted older sister type with all of the social graces and life experience that I lack on top of a superdreadnought-class sexual history makes me indescribably angry. Yes, I said angry. You’re going to take her as your secretary while I—” She suddenly pinched her nose shut and moaned again.

“Hmmmmmmgh!!”

“S-Sento?” Seiya was shocked again.

She was panting heavily, elbows planted on the long table and head drooping while they all looked on in concern. “Why not ask... why she’s applying?” she whispered at last in an exhausted voice.

“Y-Yeah... Yeah, good idea.”

Yes, ask why she’s applying, Seiya told himself. That couldn’t possibly come off as sexual harassment.

“Moffu. Ask her stage name already!”

“Shut up!” Seiya cleared his throat loudly, then turned back to Eiko-san. “Ah... I’m sorry about that, Adachi Eiko-san.”

“Of course,” she replied with unwavering calm.

“I know that this has been a rather difficult experience,” Seiya apologized again, “but one last question... could I ask why you want to work at this park?”

Yes, that was the one thing he couldn’t understand. Why would a woman with a history like hers, who could make gobs of money in the nightlife if she wanted, choose to work for this crummy amusement park?

“Ah. Let me see...” Eiko-san seemed to consider the question. She put a finger to her shapely lip and looked up at the ceiling; there was something unbelievably seductive about this mannerism.

What Is she thinking about? He wondered if he should use his magic. The magic he received from the princess of Maple Land, to

read any person's mind just once...

No... This wasn't the time, he decided. If they did hire her, and she started working with them, it would be better saved for a more auspicious time. Call it underhanded if you wish, but Kanie Seiya was not a man who wasted his grenades.

"...ergh," he whispered. Isuzu was staring in his direction with a scowl. Could she tell what he was thinking? No, no, she wasn't that perceptive...

Some time later, Eiko-san spoke again: "...I just don't think my last job was for me. I certainly enjoyed it, of course, but I wanted to see the smiles of the people I was entertaining. That's why I applied here."

"Ah... hahh," Seiya said uncertainly.

"Is that not enough?" Eiko wanted to know.

"Well, U-um..." He felt tears forming in his eyes, but he held them back. A woman who could give such an articulate answer... how, when, why? The world was growing more and more incomprehensible. The phrase "I enjoyed it, of course" was the most traumatic blow of all—it was that everyday fashion in which she said it. For some reason, it just made him feel even more miserable. *Seriously*, he asked himself, *how is this possible? Dammit...*

Anyway, just calm down.

Seiya took in a deep breath, and found it in him to say: "Thank you very much. We'll tell you our decision soon."

After Eiko-san left the conference room, Moffle immediately lashed out at Seiya. "Why didn't you ask for her stage name, fumo?! You're the worst manager I've ever seen! I'm so disappointed! I despair for you wannabe 'gentlemen'!"

"I could *not* ask!" Seiya retorted. "And if you're that disappointed, go hang yourself!"

"Hah! Look at my body, fumo. You can't kill me with hanging," Moffle replied scornfully. "I'd just dangle there looking like a *teru-teru bozu*!"

"Is that bragging or self-deprecation?" Seiya wanted to know.

"Moffu..." Moffle ignored him, then took a snapshot of Adachi Eiko's resume picture with his cell phone and sent it off somewhere, accompanied by a short message.

"Could you *not* take pictures of her resume?" Seiya requested pointedly. "Where did you send it, anyway?"

"To Tricen. I'm asking if he recognizes her, fumo. He knows a lot about AVs."

More things Seiya didn't want to know. So that chibi-triceratops character knew a lot about AVs, did he? Disgusting. "Listen, you..."

"Now I just wait for a response, fumo."

There was no way he'd be able to identify her from a tiny photo

where she was facing the camera with no makeup on, though. After all, beautiful women all tended to look the same.

As if reading Seiya's thoughts, Isuzu glared at him again. "You're not going to scold him, are you? You really want to know, don't you? That's disgusting."

"Hey!" Seiya objected. "What a rude thing to say."

"I'm not entirely angry, though," she mused. "Knowing that you have interest in such things as well... If you like, I could show you my own—*hmmmmmmgh!!!*" Isuzu clasped her hands over her face with all the force she could muster, then banged her forehead on the table.

Seiya scooted back, disturbed by her behavior. "S-Sento?"

"Don't... worry..." Isuzu said weakly.

She's definitely acting strangely today, Seiya thought suspiciously. She was usually so calm and aloof—this was seeming less like a physical illness and more like an emotional breakdown.

Just then, Moffle's cell phone buzzed. "A reply from Tricen already, fumo. Hmm... Yes, I see... fumo, fumo..." Moffle peered at the LCD screen and nodded sharply. Then he let out a deep sigh and gazed into the distance. "...Well, call in the next one, fumo," he declared as he put his cell phone away.

"...Did he recognize her?" Seiya asked.

"Recognize who?" Moffle asked innocently.

"Well... Eiko-san."

"Yeah, he figured out her stage name, fumo. So?"

"W-Well..."

"He knows her label and her best-known works." Moffle said appreciatively. "That Tricen, fumo. He's always on the ball! Now, on to the next applicant." As Moffle flipped to the next applicant's resume, Seiya caught the corners of his mouth curling upwards.

That bastard. He knows and he isn't going to tell me, Seiya realized. *He knows I can't just come out and ask him! And what's more, he moves right on to the next applicant! That mascot is utterly perverse!*

"The boys and I might stop by a rental shop tonight, get a little drunk and a little hot and bothered, fumo," Moffle remarked to no one in particular. "Ahh, that'll be fun. I can't wait, fumo."

"Ngh..." Seiya groaned.

"Want to know, fumo? Want to know, fumo?"

"Guh... of course I don't! Call in the next applicant!" Seiya commanded the general affairs employee, thrusting out his right hand like the captain of a certain space battleship.

Just then, Isuzu said something unbelievable. "I want to know. Lord Moffle, tell m—*hmmmmmmmmgh!*"

"S-Sento?" Seiya was shocked.

Moffle's eyes glinted with curiosity. "Oh-ho? Our royal guardsman

expresses interest in the most unlikely things. I'd love to know why, fumo."

"O-Obviously, to see if hiring her would lead to complaints about our park... I mean, to learn the secrets of how she charms men so effortlessly—*hmmmmmmgh!*" For the umpteenth time now, she pinched her nose and banged her head on the table.

Maybe she really wasn't feeling well? She had mentioned feeling ill during the chaos earlier... Seiya was starting to get really worried. "Hey... are you okay?"



“I’m not okay at all.” Isuzu looked at him, her hand pressed against her injured forehead. There were tears in her eyes. “I haven’t felt like this since I was in kindergarten, needing to go to the bathroom but being unable to say it and desperately having to clamp down on my—*hmmmmgh!*”

Seiya was just starting to think he should call an ambulance when there was a knock at the door.

“Excuse me! Sorry I’m late!” The second applicant came in.

She was a girl of high school age, with short, chestnut brown hair and large, twinkling eyes. Her movements were brisk and energetic.

Her face was flushed and she was panting hard as she strode up to the interviewers’ table. “I’m Bando Biino! It’s a pleasure to meet you!”

She expressed herself with clarity and articulation. *Plus two points for that*, Seiya thought.

Isuzu whispered something about a dream again, but Seiya ignored it. He’d decided it was best not to think too hard about anything she said today.

Bando Biino was wearing a school uniform, a khaki cardigan over the old-fashioned sailor style. According to her resume, she was a first year in high school in the same city Seiya lived in.

She was cheerful and cute, with nice curves, and an aura that guests would probably find charming. *Plus one point*.

The main problem was—

“Um... Bando Biino-san. Before we start, could I ask you a question?”

“Absolutely!”

“...What’s with the blood stain?”

There was a bright red patch that extended from her left side down to her hip. Wait—that wasn’t a blood stain. It was the lustrous, sparkling color of fresh blood. It continued to soak, as he watched, further into the cloth of her cardigan.

Minus 200 points.

“Ooh, sorry! I was just in such a hurry...” Biino tried to cover her blood-stained side, bashfully.

“Bashful” was an unexpected reaction... And what did being in a hurry have to do with it?

“D-Did you hurt yourself?”

“Ah! I’m fine, I’m fine! This is nothing, really!” Biino waved her hands hastily. Droplets of blood flew from her fingertips, speckling the conference room floor with ominous red.

Seiya flinched, Isuzu knitted her brows, and Moffle tilted his head thoughtfully.

“Er... are you sure you’re fine?” Seiya asked.

It occurred to him that Biino wasn't as animated as he'd initially thought. Her breathing was ragged, her legs were trembling a little, and she was growing paler and paler by the minute.

Their last applicant, Eiko-san, had certainly made an impression—but Biino-san was blowing them away in a totally different sense.

"If you wouldn't mind... explaining how you got injured?"

"O-Oh, no need! I don't want to make... excuses... for why I'm late! Please... hahh... hahh... continue the interview!"

It was a ridiculous time to start acting like the hero of a shonen manga. "I won't make excuses" was an admirable attitude to have, but the active bleeding sort of took it out of that realm.

He turned to Isuzu and whispered, "What do you think?"

(I'm not sure. I think she's trying to use the suspension bridge effect to make you care about *h—hmmmmgh!*)

Then she went about her strange ritual again (details omitted for your convenience).

Yeah, right, Seiya thought. Forget her.

Then he whispered to Moffle, "What do you think?"

(It looks to me like a stab wound. She's probably lost about a liter of blood. Given her build, she'll likely stay conscious and answering questions for about ten more minutes.) His comment was practical yet strangely unhelpful.

"L-Let's call you an ambulance..."

"No, don't!" Biino insisted. "I don't want to cause trouble over a silly little wound. My... my... My life is riding on this interview!"

Oh, for the love of... How could her life possibly be riding on this crummy amusement park?

(She's certainly got passion, fumo. You don't think it's... kagebara?) Moffle whispered with a tremble.

Kagebara was an act through which a samurai would admonish his lord by slitting his own stomach, requesting an audience, and then dying in front of his eyes.

It wasn't something you'd do at a part-time job interview. Even if you got the job, you'd be dead.

(I'm sure... it's not kagebara.)

(Well, I suppose not... Hmm?) Just then, an incoming call sound chimed out from Moffle's smartphone, which he'd left on the desk. (It's from the security center, fumo. Hold on a minute.)

He thrust out a paw to silence Seiya, then started engaging in a quiet conversation. Meanwhile, Biino was leaning over and pleading with Seiya.

"Please. Please... ngh... the interview... Blugh..." Fresh blood trailed from a corner of her pretty lips.

(Looks like she's got some internal bleeding, fumo. Better hurry.)

Moffle said, briefly interrupting his phone call to warn him.

(H-Hurry?!)

“Hurry! A-Ask me a question... please! While I’m still conscious!”

“R-Right...” Cowed by the demonic frenzy in Biino-san’s eyes, Seiya found himself complying. He whispered to Isuzu, “call an ambulance,” then began an entirely cursory interview.

“So, um... for your preferred working times, y-you said after 4:00 p.m. on weekdays, right? You’d mainly be working closing shifts—”

“Blugh!”

“Um?”

“Blugh... khlugh... I c-can work... after 4:00!” she confirmed through the blood-stained fingers she held over her mouth.

“I g-guess I should hurry. The jobs you applied for... guest control and merchandising. Why did you want those positions?”

Guest control mainly meant directing and guiding guests, while merchandising meant working in the shops. These were both jobs with a lot of human contact.

“Yes... huff... huff... I want to see... hurgh... the customers... blugh! Smile...” Beads of sweat clung to her pale face as she bared her teeth desperately.

A face like that wouldn’t bring a smile to anyone—except maybe her mortal enemies.

“You also asked about the daycare. The trial period for that one is double the standard length... is that all right?”

“O-Of course... I... hlugh... I love to see... hng... happy... guh... children!”

Her expression was truly chilling. Her dedication was admirable, but seeing Biino’s face right now would make 100% of the children cry, no question.

“U-Understood.” Even to prolong the conversation, he couldn’t think of anything to ask that would teach him more than he already knew. He really hoped the ambulance would arrive soon.

“We’ll let you know in a few days if you get the job or not. For now, please get treatment!”

“I-I can’t!”

“Get treatment, dammit!”

“I-I’m sorry... I still have so much more... cough! To tell you... blugh! About myself!”

“Uh...”

Biino grabbed her knees, trembling, shoulders heaving. It was then that Moffle finished his call with the security center and nudged Seiya in the shoulder.

(What?)

(According to security, there was a slasher incident at Amagi

Station earlier. Some madman stabbed a high school girl in front of the station...)

(What the hell!)

(The attacker's apparently been taken into custody, but the girl he stabbed just said 'I'm fine' repeatedly, then rode off on her moped, fumo.)

(I... I see...)

(It's apparently on the news right now, fumo. That's why security got worried and called me...)

Ah, that explains it all.

Seiya could admire the bravery it took to race to an interview, even after getting attacked by a slasher. *Plus one point.* But she could have had a bit more consideration about the position she was putting them in. *Minus 100 points.*

At any rate, for now, they just had to deal with the strange situation they had found themselves in.

"Um... Bando Biino-san. We understand that you're passionate about the job. W-We can't guarantee we'll hire you, but you can be optimistic about your chances."

"Th-Thank... hnn... you... gluh!"

"So, please go with the ambulance right now. Forgive our presumption, but we've already called 119. Come on. Don't push yourself too hard. Ah... don't look at me with those hollow eyes, it's going to haunt my nightmares. Oh, come on..."

Unable to just keep talking to her from the interviewer's table, Seiya stood up. He barely managed to catch Biino as she pitched out of the folding chair.

"Sorry... sorry..." Biina repeated from within Seiya's bloodstained arms.

"Is that ambulance here yet? Let's carry her outside. Hey, Moffle, get off the phone and help me!" he yelled at Moffle, who was talking on his smartphone once more.

"Wait, fumo. I got another call from the security center..."

"Oh, come on!"

"I didn't... hrr... want... to be late..."

"Yes, that's very n-noble of you..."

"But I need to apologize... for one more thing..."

Just then, the conference room door banged open.

The person who came in was a half-naked man carrying a kitchen knife.

"Huh? What?"

"Whew... whew..."

He was breathing heavily. His knife was smeared in blood. He was wearing nothing but underwear and a stocking that covered his face.

He was, to put it lightly, a pervert—and not the subtle kind of pervert.

Was this their next applicant? No, surely no one would come to an interview dressed like this... What the hell—

“Seiya, Seiya.”

“Wh-What?”

“I got an update from the security center. The earlier report got it wrong. The man who stabbed her hasn’t been caught yet, fumo.”

“Wh-What?”

“Also, a suspicious person just broke through the employee gate, fumo. Well actually, the guard was too afraid to try to stop him...”

Seiya looked at Biino-san. She nodded weakly. “I’m sorry... He’s my big brother...”

“B-Big brother?”

“He doesn’t... want me to have a job, so...”

And that’s why he stabbed her? That makes no sense, Seiya thought. And... is he glaring at me from behind that stocking? Is he registering me as an enemy for holding his little sister?

“Whew... whew...” His shoulders heaving, the half-naked man took a step forward.

“Um, okay, calm down. Calm down, please. Would you please calm down?” Seiya urged.

“Whew... whew...” The half-naked man raised his knife.

“Ah, um, are you going to stab me, then? Stab *me*? I’d warn against it. It would be a loss for humanity... also I’m quite good in a fight, you know. Well, I’ve never been in a serious brawl, but I’m a natural at everything I try. ...I’m very strong. I think I’m strong. I might be strong. Well, you might want to get ready...”

“Are you quoting Sada Masashi lyrics? You must be confident, fumo.”

“Shut up! He’s coming!”

“Wheeeew!” The man charged forward, brandishing the kitchen knife. He was aiming for Seiya.

“Woah, woah, woah!” With Biino cradled in one arm, he wielded the folding chair like a shield with the other.

A second later, he felt a powerful impact.

The knife had gone through the back of the folding chair—a few centimeters to one side and it would have pierced his neck.

“Why, you...” Seiya twisted the chair and kicked the man off. The man staggered back a few steps, forced to release the knife that was stuck deep in the chair.

“Would you do something already?!”

Responding to Seiya’s scream, Isuzu pulled out her musket and fired four “Pain of Stubbing Your Little Toe on the Dresser” bullets into him. As the madman doubled over in pain, Moffle swiftly covered

the distance between them. A powerful one-two punch followed by a hard uppercut followed.

“Whew...” The man flew so high he almost hit the ceiling, then landed in a heap on the floor below. By that time, Moffle had already turned his back on the man and was wiping his paws with a handkerchief.

The man in his underwear was lying perfectly still.

“Moffu... he’ll be eating through a straw for a while, fumo.” It was a line on every man’s “top 100 lines I’d like to say some day” list, and Moffle said it with the utmost cool.

“You know... watching you two, I sometimes think you should quit this crummy amusement park and start working for a military contractor or something...” Seiya sighed.

Ambulances and police cars arrived, throwing the office into chaos for some time.

An Amagi Police Department detective grilled them; they made a plausible show of innocence, and by the time things had calmed down, it was around 8:00 p.m. The park had closed for the day.

“How could this have happened?” Seiya asked as he mopped up the darkened bloodstain that Bando Biino had left on the floor. “We were supposed to be interviewing part-timers today. Instead, we get one former AV actress—who made quite an impact, herself—followed by a girl who nearly gets us accused of battery! It’s ridiculous...”

“That’s right, fumo. We were the victims here,” Moffle whispered. He was likewise busily scrubbing at a bloodstain on the wall. “That policeman tried to get me to admit to killing intent, fumo. I *repeatedly* said it was self-defense!”

“I can see why he’d assume *excessive* self-defense, seeing as you broke the man’s jaw... I think he really will be drinking through a straw for a while.”

“Hm. Well, perhaps I could’ve held back a *little* more, fumo.”

“You’re ridiculously strong,” Seiya accused. “Show a little remorse.”

“Moffu...”

According to the detective, the man in his underwear really was Biino’s brother. Seiya didn’t know what mental illness he had, but apparently he was extremely restrictive of Biino’s lifestyle, among other things. He’d caused countless incidents in the past, with this being the final escalation. It wasn’t appropriate to laugh about it, but at the same time, what could you do but laugh?

“Now, that Biino girl. What do you think’ll happen to her, fumo?”

“How should I know?” Seiya retorted. “I hope I never have to hear about it.”

“She sure did have passion, though.”

“What, are you saying you want to hire her?”

“Now, I didn’t say that, fumo.” Feigning innocence, Moffle continued cleaning.

“..... Sento, what do you think?” Seiya asked Isuzu, who had just come back with a bucket of water.

“Do you mean, about whether we should hire her or not?” She was doing less of the “Hmmmgh!” thing now, but there was still caution in her tone. She was keeping a hand near her mouth at all times.

Isuzu’s repeated “Hmmmgh!” during the police questioning had complicated matters, though they’d managed to write it off with “she goes into a panic at the sight of blood.”

“Yeah,” Seiya confirmed. “You’re the one who did the screenings, right? I want to hear your opinion.”

“I see...” Isuzu thought for a moment. “...General wisdom would be that she’s unhireable. On the other hand, she could be an asset in terms of dealing with onstage trouble. After all... despite being stabbed, she was able to maintain her smile and her sense of duty. With proper training, her passion could make her a powerful positive force for our park.”

“Hmm...” *At last*, Seiya thought, *she’s making sense*. Isuzu’s personal analyses and character judgments were always on point at times like these.

“Besides, after such an off-putting incident, I’m sure you won’t be attracted to *h—hmmmgh!*”

For heaven’s sake, not again. Seiya exchanged a glance and a shrug with Moffle.

“...It seems I’m still suffering aftereffects of that nut,” Isuzu admitted. “You probably shouldn’t make me talk...”

“Nut?” Seiya inquired.

Moffle clapped his paws together and nodded. “Ah... I see now, fumo. They fed you a druth nut, did they? And that’s why you tried to kill Macaron and Tiramii this afternoon, fumo?”

“Yes,” said Isuzu.

“Well, it was just an innocent prank. Try to forgive them, fumo.”

“No,” she disagreed, “it was a *malicious* prank. I will not forgive them.”

Seiya wasn’t entirely sure, but it seemed that Isuzu’s strange behavior today had been caused by this ‘nut’ that Moffle had mentioned. “What’s this nut you’re talking about? Does it make you interrupt yourself and shout ‘Hmmmgh!’ in the middle of sentences?” he asked.

But Moffle and Isuzu just looked away, as if unsure about how to

explain.

“Erm... It wouldn't be my place to say, fumo.”

“It's effectively like spiking someone's drink,” said Isuzu. “You shouldn't worry about it.”

They didn't seem to want to explain it. So, deciding that it would be a waste of time to press further, Seiya returned to the original topic: “Well, fine, whatever. ...I see what you're saying about Banda Biino. What about our first subject, Adachi Eiko-san? What do you think of her?”

“Why did you call her Eiko-san?” Isuzu demanded.

“Geh...” coughed Seiya.

“Well, anyway... I don't think there's any risk of her history hurting the park's image,” Isuzu allowed. “There isn't much crossover between the kinds of people who would know about her and our customer base. And... a girl with a history like hers should be able to face any guest with a smile. She could also be a strong positive force in the park.”

“Hmm... all fair points,” said Seiya.

“However,” Isuzu warned him, “both are also potential sources of trouble. A woman with Adachi Eiko's history could cause friction in the workplace. And Bando Biino doesn't seem to have a very stable home life, so even if today's incident was mitigated, there's a real chance of her bringing trouble into the park in the future.”

After hearing her out, Seiya and Moffle both let out an impressed hum.

“What are you humming about?” Isuzu asked suspiciously.

“Well... I was just surprised that you said something so reasonable,” said Seiya.

“Moffu,” Moffle agreed. “How can someone so good at reading people be so bad at communication that she has to express herself with a gun, fumo?”

“It's inconsistent with the time you scouted me, too,” Seiya noted. “Is it some sort of psychological disorder?”

Their insensitive comments prompted a dangerous glare from Isuzu, and as usual, she started reaching down to pull her musket from the mysterious space under her skirt. “If that's mockery, I'll make you regret it...”

“Look? See? That's what I mean!”

“People hate violent women nowadays, fumokay?!”

Seiya and Moffle protested while hiding behind the mop and the desk respectively.

“Ghh...” Isuzu's reaction suggested that the use of the gun was reflexive, and she moved her hand away without drawing it.

“...For heaven's sake. Today's taken it out of me, fumo,” Moffle

sighed. “I’m going to check in on my House of Sweets, then go home. Once you decide the schedule for tomorrow’s interviews, shoot me an email, fumo.”

All of the commotion around Biino-san had forced them to cancel the remaining interviews. The rest of the applicants would be seen tomorrow, and so on. After Moffle left, Seiya and Isuzu stayed behind, silently finishing up the cleaning.

About two minutes later, someone peeked into the conference room. “E-Excuse me...”

“...?” Both of them looked up.

“Is this where the interviews are being held?” the stranger asked. She was a girl around elementary school age with her hair in pigtails and big, round eyes. Her clothes were rather fashionable, but she wouldn’t be out of place wearing a randoseru-style backpack, either.



“Who are you?” Seiya wanted to know.

“Chujo Shiina. I applied for the part-time job... but I was late to my interview...” the girl said haltingly.

“We had an incident; interviews are delayed until tomorrow. We can’t hire you, though.”

“Wh-What?! Why not?”

“Child labor laws,” he explained. “You’re too young.”

“B-But I...”

“The exit is that way. Thanks for stopping by,” Seiya declared flippantly. Chujo Shiina left, her shoulders slumped.

“My dream came true again... but not exactly. What on earth is going on, here?” Isuzu muttered to herself.

“What are you talking about?” Seiya asked. “...And why was there a child coming to an interview? You’re the one who screened the applicants, right?”

“Screened the applicants... that’s right, I did.” Isuzu clapped her hands together in realization. “Why didn’t I realize it earlier? I had that dream because I’d looked through everybody’s resumes. The memory worked its way into my subconscious, and that’s why I had that dre—*hmmmmgh!*”

“The ‘hmmmmgh!’ again, huh?” he commented. “Give it a rest already...”

“Hahh... hahh... I’m sorry...” Isuzu said, shoulders heaving. “But that wasn’t a mistake in the screening. She *is* in high school. She looks like a child, but she goes to Amagi High, just as we do. She’s a first year.”

“What? Ugh...” Seiya popped his head out into the hallway, but she was already gone. “Why didn’t you say that earlier?!”

“I wanted to... but I was afraid I might run my mouth again.”

“For heaven’s sake... we’ll have to send her an apology email later,” Seiya grumped.

“I doubt she’ll apply again after how you treated her.”

“Yeah, but it’s the decent thing to do.”

Isuzu was stunned by how sincere he sounded. “...I see.”

They finished cleaning the conference room not long after. They put away the cleaning tools, then headed for their offices, which were in the same building, to get ready to go home.

They were just about to leave with their bags in hand when Isuzu spoke up abruptly. “Kanie-kun.”

“Hmm?”

“You were right about what you said.”

It came so out of nowhere that Seiya didn’t know what she was talking about. “What I said about what?”

“What you and Moffle said earlier... that I have a good eye for people, but that I have trouble communicating,” Isuzu admitted stiffly.

“Ahh...”

She continued speaking as they walked down the unoccupied hallway. “I don’t entirely understand it myself. When I’m working *for* someone, analyzing others, I can keep a cool head. But when I’m in charge... I lose my objectivity. That’s why I’ve made so many mistakes. I really was on the verge of doing irreversible damage...”

Seiya was reminded that, prior to his arrival, she had been the acting manager here. Isuzu had appeared to be working quite hard, but none of her efforts had been paying off. As a result, the park had been driven to the brink of closure. At the end of last year, they’d found themselves in the impossible position of needing to get 100,000 visitors to the park in two weeks. That’s when she’d invited Seiya in, and he’d accomplished his (fraudulent) miracle. The current acting manager had made extraordinary things happen, while the former acting manager had done nothing; and now, she had to serve as his secretary. He couldn’t imagine how frustrating that must be for her.

Too bad he couldn’t use his magic to read her mind. “Reading people and interacting with them are completely different talents,” he told her. “You shouldn’t worry about it so much.” The statement was nothing especially profound; it was like telling a baseball player, ‘pitching and batting are completely different talents.’

But she fell silent, eyes wide... and after a few moments, she smiled. It was an expression he’d never seen from her before—as if she was about to cry from gratitude. “Kanie-kun. You truly are cruel,” she said. “It would be so much easier just to envy and hate you, but you won’t let me do that. I’ve been trying to tell myself that the difference in skill between us is a given, but that’s not how I really feel: I really do envy you. I just can’t accept that feeling because I—*hmmmggh!*”

What on earth? Seiya thought exasperatedly. *Back to the “hmmmggh” again?*

“Hey... get a grip already.” Seiya watched, dumbfounded, as Isuzu slammed her head against the hall window. “I guess that nut is still doing its thing...”

Just as it seemed like she was speaking from the heart for once, this happened. There was no way he could take any of it seriously. But one thing it did tell him was that Sento Isuzu had a lot of internal conflict.

Of course, it was understandable that someone so average would struggle in the face of a modern-day Renaissance man like himself... “Well, it’s natural that you’d be jealous of my talents,” he said immodestly. “It happens all the time, so don’t let it bother you; it doesn’t bother me in the slightest.”

“Kanie-kun... that ‘looking down at you from my lofty perch’ attitude is quite cruel...” Isuzu murmured dejectedly.

“How can I not look down on you?” he wanted to know. “I really am above you.”

“Goddess Libra, bring misery upon this man...” Isuzu sighed, then returned her bag to her shoulder.

They had a brief discussion about their upcoming schedules, then split up in the park’s underground passageway.

Isuzu headed for Maple Castle, at the center of the park, while Seiya headed for the employee gate. Seiya still had a fair amount of work to do, but most of it was sending emails, so he decided he’d do it after he got home.

He passed through the gate into the bicycle lot. He’d been taking his bike to work lately, because the fact that he tended to work late into the night made catching buses inconvenient. Fortunately, he lived nearby, so even going at a leisurely pace, it didn’t take longer than 30 minutes.

“Ah, Kanie-san. Good work today.” A member of the cast, heading for the bus stop, shot him a greeting.

Seiya responded with a “hey,” and nothing more, then started off on his bicycle. It was nighttime in April, so it was still chilly out, and he zipped up his jacket with one hand as he pedaled along.

He left the narrow employee-use side road for the main one, and cut through the verdant hills in the direction of central Amagi City.

“Still, it really seems like...” Seiya whispered, his voice soft enough to be swallowed by the wind.

He wasn’t stupid. He wasn’t totally oblivious, either. He had a vague idea of what that “nut” Isuzu ate must have done. He had heard what she’d said each time before she stifled himself, and he remembered. And the pattern of things she avoided saying suggested

—

He couldn’t be sure, but—

It was just a hypothesis, but—

Is she attracted to me?

He was hoping it was just his usual self-obsession, but... Some kind of strange nut had compelled Sento Isuzu—who normally never expressed herself in ways other than anger—to speak from the heart, and she was trying to restrain herself. That was why she had been acting that way. If nothing else, it was almost certain that she harbored some sort of feelings for him.

The bigger issue was that the moment he realized this, he found his own heart racing a bit faster. He wished he could just say “goodness me, what a troublesome turn of events” and remain the

cool, above-it-all person he'd always been. But he couldn't. He was excited. He even rather liked the idea.

Still, he could imagine several problems:

Problem one: She and I are still (effectively) boss and employee.

It's not good for a boss to date an employee, he told himself. *It's like a club president dating the team assistant: Emotion clouds judgment, and the team's trust dissolves.* A manager (acting) having sexual tension with his secretary was out of the question.

Problem two: What about Latifah?

Well, it's not as if she and I are in love or anything, he told himself guiltily. *She did kiss me because of that 'revelation' of hers, and to be honest, out of all the women in my life so far, she's probably the woman I've been most attracted to. Of course, she's forgotten all of that, but that doesn't mean my attraction to her is canceled out...* It was a complicated relationship.

Problem three: What if I'm just imagining it?

I don't think I am, but what if some fatal lapse in judgment has led me to a mistaken hypothesis? he mused. *What if I have a slip of the tongue that makes it sound like I'm interested, and Isuzu says, "You seem to be under a misapprehension" or "Sorry, I find you very unattractive"? I could never recover. My pride would be eternally shattered.* He would have to throw himself off Maple Castle and die—and he didn't want to die.

"Hmm..."

The road was downhill from here. A truck passed beside him, stirring up a cold wind.

Ahead was a four-way intersection. As the light turned yellow, he put on the brakes and stopped. A moment later, an enormous tanker truck tore across his vision, rumbling the ground below. It was going quite fast. If he hadn't stopped at the yellow light, something terrible could have happened to him.

Is this a sign of some kind? Seiya wondered, gripping the brake lever tightly.

Okay, he decided. It was a yellow light. Yellow. Yellow meant caution.

Just pretend you didn't notice what went down today, he told himself. *I'm just a boorish, oblivious male. I don't know what that weird nut did. I won't think any deeper about what Isuzu said.* That should hold things off for a while.

Having made up his mind, he felt a lot better. Normally he'd want to talk to someone and put his mind at ease, but he didn't have anyone he could confide in about this: Kanie Seiya was an isolated man.

Just then, he felt the smartphone tucked deep in his back pocket vibrate. He'd just received an email. ".....!"

It was probably spam, but regardless, he took out his phone and checked it. It was from Sento Isuzu. Seiya gasped, though not quite in panic—it was more like tension.

He opened the email. “.....Yeah, figures.” As he’d assumed, it was just about work: the interview schedules for tomorrow, and so on; her plans for dealing with Chujo Shiina, whom he’d turned away earlier; supplemental information about Adachi Eiko and Bando Biino. She explained it all in plain and unembellished terms.

《Understood. Talk to you later》 he typed back briefly.

The light turned green. He was racing down a two-lane one-way street when his phone vibrated again. He stopped his bike and checked his email: it was from Isuzu.

《Thank you for everything. I’m sorry about today.》 A brief message. How was he supposed to interpret it? Seiya spent the rest of the night thinking it over, but he couldn’t reach a conclusion.

“Your Highness, royal guard Yisuzurch Sentolucia presents herself for audience.” Maple Castle, at the center of the park: Isuzu was kneeling on the flagstones of the rooftop garden.

“Thank you for coming, as always, Isuzu-san.” Latifah, who had been talking to a bird perched on a longstalk holly branch, stopped, and smiled beatifically.

As its name implied, the rooftop garden was built on the castle’s top floor. Beneath the beautiful stars, the trees grew lush and the flowers bloomed, kissed by the gentle night wind.

The slender girl stood in one corner of the garden. She had pale skin that seemed translucent, sparkling golden hair, and a long dress that drifted like a willow reed in the wind.

“Do join me,” Latifah—the slender girl—said. “I have made tea.”

“Ahh...” Sento Isuzu, AKA Yisuzurch Sentolucia, had a complicated relationship with Princess Latifah: Latifah Fleuranza was the princess of the magical kingdom known as Maple Land. Of course, she had sworn her loyalty to her, and she served her with great reverence; that wasn’t the source of the problem.

The problem was that Latifah had remained fourteen years old for over a decade.

At three or four years old, Isuzu had had her first audience with Latifah in the royal gardens. Latifah was fourteen, then, and like a beautiful older woman. She had crouched before the little Isuzu and said, “It is a great pleasure to meet you, Yisuzurch-san.”

Their next meeting was much, much later. Isuzu was sixteen, now, and the taller of the two. This time, the princess looked up at her and said, once again: “It is a great pleasure to meet you, Yisuzurch-san.” This time her tone was reverent, as if she were the one meeting an

amazing older woman...

Of course, this did not shake Isuzu's loyalty in any way. It just unsettled her, the way she could not tell if she should revere her, or dote on her. If they ever had a chance to speak more intimately, should she talk to her like she was older, or like she was younger? Isuzu didn't know.

Then, today, a new problem had arisen.

Your Highness... Isuzu thought. *I fear I must ask you a question. That mortal, so arrogant, yet possessing such mysterious power—How do you feel about him? How do you feel about Kanie Seiya?*

On park property: the first employee dorm, Winchester Estate

In Macaron's room, where they had been planning their viewing party of Adachi Eiko's work, the atmosphere was that of a wake. When Tiramii had gleefully presented the AV he had procured, the picture on the packaging hadn't looked like Adachi Eiko at all. PR manager Tricen had informed them earlier that she was an adult actress named Anjo Erina. But "Anjo Erina" was an older woman of considerable girth who didn't resemble Adachi Eiko at all.

"There must... there must be some kind of mistake, ron." Macaron said, looking crushed. He'd spent the night up until then with a can of beer in one hand, his white wool fluffed up in expectation.

"Mii... I looked all around rental shops and stores, but this was the only video this actress put out, mii..." Tiramii replied exhaustedly. His button eyes were hollow, lacking their usual luster.

"Ah, for the love of... so Tricen's info was off, fumo..." Moffle whispered. He poured himself another glass of hot water and shochu, upended it and groaned.

"But... how do you confuse the girl in the resume photo with a woman who looks like an open-weight Olympic medalist?! Is he blind, ron?!"

"Well, you see... we talked on the phone earlier, and it seems the image I sent him got a little stretched, fumo. His cell phone is old, and uses these strange algorithms..."

"Then send him a proper picture! Tell Tricen to—"

"I did, fumo. He said he gave up. Just couldn't find her, fumo."

"Ron dammit! How can this be?!" Macaron slammed his beer can onto the table.

"You didn't even meet her in person," Moffle scoffed. "What are you so riled up about?"

"Because you meeting her today got me all worked up, ron! She's

a denizen of a distant world we'll never be part of! Knowing that she visited our workplace heightens the reality, the believability! Surely you understand the delicacy of such matters, ron?!"

"Hm, I suppose..."

"And now... and now... now I'm just stuck with blue balls, ron! You and Tricen are both *so stupid*, ron!"

"Hmm," Moffle mused dangerously. "I'm not sure that I care for your tone. You can call Tricen what you want, but if you call me stupid..."

As the air began to crackle between the two of them, Tiramii interrupted, trying to settle them down. "Don't fight, you two! Let's just watch it, mii! It might've been 480 yen outta the bargain bin, but it's still worth something, right?"

"It's worth nothing, ron! *Nothing*, ron!"

"Moffu. Heavyset MILF is a bridge too far for me..."

Responding to their criticisms, Tiramii just tilted his head in confusion. "Aw, really? I could go for her..."

"You..." The other two were struck by the limitless range of Tiramii's libido.

In the end, they didn't watch the video he had bought. Instead, they dug into Macaron's DVD catalog and watched *Black Hawk Down*.

Their despondence pervaded through the first thirty minutes. But, soon enough, they were enjoying themselves with booze in hand: The American army's operation in Somalia. The unexpected trouble. The thrilling shootout. Macaron had a 6.1ch sound system installed in his room, which heightened the immersion.

"Hmm, this movie really is good, ron. It's a breakthrough in the zombie genre, ron."

"What? But it's a war movie, fumo."

"No, it's a zombie movie. That's what the writer Sato Daisuke said, ron—The Somalian militiamen keep popping up, they mow them down, but it never stops, ron."

"Oh! It really is like a zombie movie, mii."

"I always cry when Gordon and Shughart die, ron. Oh, also! This movie brought M14s back into style. That was always a good gun, you know? But young people don't like wooden stocks, so it picked up an old-fashioned image. But they feature M14s with polymer frames and Picatinny rails, and the lifelike impact—"

And so they talked and enjoyed themselves. Riled up by the battle scenes, crying over the death scenes, talking fervently about the detailed portrayal of the weapons—Thanks to that, they all forgot about the unfortunate AV.

On park property: the second employee dorm, BT Estate

That night, Sento Isuzu sent a careful email directly to Adachi Eiko:

«I am the acting manager's secretary. For reference, could you tell me your stage name and a list of prior roles from your previous employer? We must take into account the potential for complaints from your former agency in our hiring decision. Of course, we won't share that information with anyone.»

She meant it when she said she wouldn't share it, but everything else was mainly pretext. She just couldn't stop wondering about it, and given what had happened with Seiya that day, she doubted she would get much sleep. So, Isuzu had steeled her resolve and inquired.

The reply came at once. It included Eiko's stage name, a number of her works, and a thank you for her interview earlier.

«Thank you very much. We'll let you know if you got the job soon,» she replied, then decided to search for one of the titles at once.

The title was “Nipple Buddies Assemble! Sucking All Night!”
Wait. What?

Nipple Buddies? *Sucking All Night*? The depravity. It's madness! The entire world has gone mad! Isuzu felt a chill run up her spine as she tried to imagine what kind of mortal could have come up with that title.

The thought of typing it into her keyboard directly made her cringe so, instead, she resorted to copy-paste. Immediately, search results came up. Not only were there DVDs, but a few videos available for immediate download as well. There were even some uploaded to YouTube.

“.....?” Wait a minute. YouTube? That site didn't allow adult content, did it? Either way, she had to see what was in them—with a trembling finger, she clicked.

The image was that of a farm somewhere. A country music-style BGM (likely public domain) was playing.

A lamb was nursing on a mother sheep. Trembling, it sucked and sucked as hard as it could.

“Oh, look! A baby lamb! Look at how hard it's sucking there! Look at you! You're sucking Mommy's nipple, huh?” The narrator sounded familiar. It was Adachi Eiko.

“Sheep babies are just like human ones,” she continued to narrate. “They usually only give birth to one baby at a time. This little boy is very precious to his mother. He'll grow up quick and be so full of energy! He might even be able to eat grass soon! Baby lambs just love

mama's 'milk bar!' Drink a lot and get big and strong, okay?" The narration ended, but the video continued to switch between various scenes of nursing lambs.

Then the screen went black.

It was followed by a scene of piglets suckling on their mother. "Oh, look at the piggies! All those brothers and sisters! One, two, three, four... oh, goodness gracious! This pig has ten babies! They're all fighting for mommy's nipples! Don't push, now! Suck, suck, suck, suck!"

Next came a cow nursing scene. Eiko-san narrated that one, too.

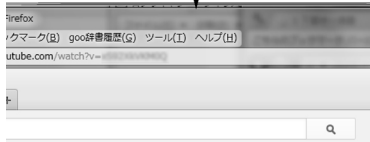
Then a hamster nursing scene. Eiko-san, once again, narrated that one.

Dogs. Horses. Cats. Various wild animals: Elephants, monkeys, and polar bears. There were even some pretty rare nursing scenes here. Just one mammal after another, after another, after another...

"Baby mammals are all nipple buddies!" Eiko-san's voice exclaimed. "They'll be sucking together all night long!"

Only after a full 20 minutes did the video finally end.

Isuzu stared at the black LCD screen for a while with furrowed brow and tilted head. "AVs..." she said slowly. "Animal videos?"



Nipple Buddies Assemble! Sucking All Night



グッド!

概要

共有

追加

設定

ヘルプ



2: Not Enough Money!

There were three things Latifah Fleuranza looked forward to every night. The first was preparing her handmade croquettes to sell to the guests the next day. The second was conversing with the birds in the rooftop garden. The third was taking a bath.

She enjoyed the hot water, which was infused with fragrant herbs from the garden, and the faintly aromatic steam... Despite her blindness, she didn't need anyone's help; she knew just where everything in the bathroom was. Even though she had lost her memory of everything up until last month, her body remembered.

But last week, Latifah had stopped taking these baths. The luxury of soaking her bare body in a tub full of hot water was one they could no longer afford—it would spike their gas and water bills. Latifah had heard that the employee dormitories had even set schedules for when hot water would be available.

Instead, she boiled hot water in the kitchen, hauled the kettle to the bathroom, poured it into a washbasin, and mixed it with cold water to reach just the right temperature. Then she stripped down, lathered herself with a towel and bar soap, and then rinsed herself off with the water remaining in the basin. She was allowed to wash her hair only once every three days, but she wouldn't allow herself to complain.



“.....” She was shivering. She hurried to the changing room, and then dried herself off with a bath towel. She felt cold and brittle, and she missed her scented tub... But it was a trivial sacrifice, she told herself.

Everyone else is working so hard, she thought. Surely, he will make another miracle happen...

“...Achoo!” Latifah let out a dainty sneeze, then groped around for her undergarments.

Sento Isuzu was using a nearby public bath. She couldn’t use her bath in the dorm, and she could hardly justify personal indulgences when she knew what indignities Princess Latifah was suffering.

The public bath she had gone to had been in business 50 years. It was the archetypal bathhouse of its age: the anachronistic mural of Mt. Fuji; the white tile floors and walls... An ancient electric fan twisted back and forth in the changing room, and glass-fronted refrigerators carried bottles of coffee milk.

As a soldier of the royal guard who had only ever bathed in her own private bath since coming to the mortal realm, her very first visit to the public bath had brought a number of surprises.

“Um, Isuzu-san...” Her companion, the Fairy of Water, Muse, spoke up hesitantly. (Isuzu had said, “It’s my first time going. Will you show me around?” and dragged her along.) “You’ve been staring at that ‘keroyon’ washbasin for a long time. I don’t think you’re going to find anything there...”

“.....” Stark naked and on one knee, Isuzu was staring at the basin, humming with interest. “Do they sell these basins?” she asked.

“The bathhouse? I don’t think so,” Muse answered. “I’ve seen them sold at Tokyu Hands, though... do you really like them?”

“No. I was merely wondering if basins were an effective form of advertising. If they’re sufficiently inexpensive, it might be worth trying...” *Could I print “Amagi Brilliant Park” on the bottoms of simple yellow washbasins,* Isuzu wondered, *and get public baths here and there to stock them?* Perhaps they could include an illustration of their headliner mascot, Moffle...

“You’re always thinking about work, huh?” Muse commented idly. “...but I hear it takes a lot of special treatment to keep the messages from peeling off those basins, you know? It might cost a lot more than you expect.”

“I see...” Anywhere she went it was cost, cost, cost. Another promising idea, nipped in the bud. Depressed, Isuzu put the basin back where she got it, then padded her way towards the bathtub. She threw her washcloth into the water unceremoniously, and was just about to

enter when—

“Oh... Isuzu-san! Isuzu-san!” Muse called urgently.

“What is it?”

Muse grabbed Isuzu’s arm and snatched the towel out of the water. “You can’t bring your washcloth into the bathtub! You need to fold up it neatly and put it on top of your head. That and washing yourself off before going in are the two iron laws of the bath house! Other people need to use it, so it’s a little gross if you don’t clean yourself off first, right?”

“Gross...” It was true that, because of the park’s budgetary issues, Isuzu hadn’t had a bath in close to a day. After spending 22 hours and 32 minutes unwashed, she could hardly deny that she was indeed ‘gross.’ Without taking a bath every eight hours, she started wanting to die, but she had forced herself to grin and bear it—even though she felt drained physically and mentally, and even moving felt like a chore. But to be considered ‘gross’... How could she ever purge such humiliation?

“Aw, hey, it’s not that bad!” Muse told her. “We just need to wash off first. Come on, this way.”

“.....” *But I just want to get into the bath already*, Isuzu thought. Still downcast, she followed Muse’s lead and sat down in front of the designated mirror, where she worked up a lather with a washcloth and soap. So as not to offend again, Isuzu watched what Muse was doing very carefully, so that she could imitate it herself. *I see... you start by washing your right leg, then you move to your hips and your waist... Then you move scrupulously down to the tips of your toes on the left foot, scrubbing in circles...*

“Wh-What is it?” Muse froze up as she noticed Isuzu’s intent gaze.

“Nothing. Please continue.”

“But when you stare at me like that... Isuzu-san, are you a ‘yuri’ type?” Muse blushed and wriggled in the face of Isuzu’s silence. “I-Is that why you invited me here? I’m flattered, but I really think we shouldn’t... I... I... when I feel you gazing at me, as naked as the day I was born, I... I...”

“.....” Isuzu waited for her to finish.

“Well, I just don’t think... I’m just not into that kind of thing...” Muse said in as neutral a voice as she could manage. She sounded exactly like a high school girl who, after horseplay in the bath got a little too intimate, came back to her senses and said, “if we go any further, we won’t be friends anymore.”

But Isuzu’s gaze didn’t falter. “...I see. I don’t entirely understand what you mean, but I must ask you to continue. It’s imperative that I properly integrate into bathhouse culture.”

“Oh. Is that what it’s all about...? I’m sorry,” Muse apologized.

“But things aren’t actually that rigid here. You just need to wash off like normal, okay?”

“Understood. I’ll wash off in my standard manner, then,” said Isuzu, who promptly started scrubbing herself off. To herself, she thought: *I want to soak in the tub as soon as possible.*

Muse just let out a sigh at first, but after a little while, she whispered to her again: “But Isuzu-san... Despite what I said, during scenes like these, we probably *should* do things that create a ‘yuri’ mood. You know, to boost sales?” Muse proposed, for some inscrutable, 4th-wall-breaking reason of business.

“...What kind of yuri mood, exactly?” Isuzu inquired.

“You know. Getting all flustered, like I was at the start,” Muse explained. “‘Oh, Isuzu-san, your complexion is so clear’ and ‘Oh? You’re making me want to tease you a little, too. Take this!’ and stuff. And then we squeal and giggle and such...”

Isuzu ceased her lathering and gazed at Muse with unforgiving indifference. “You are capable of saying some very disturbing things.”

“Oh, come on!” Muse protested. “Don’t stab me in the back!”

“I don’t really know what you’re talking about, but over-the-top boisterousness will bother those around us,” Isuzu told her primly. “Anyway, we’ll continue this discussion in the bath.”

“That’s not fair. I—”

“Enough.” Isuzu waved her hand dismissively, and then headed for the bathtub. Just to be sure, she checked the reactions of those around her: this time, nobody seemed upset about the idea of her getting into the hot water. She also put the wet towel on top of her head, as instructed.

“Ahh...” It felt wonderful. The word ‘permeating’ was surely meant for times like these. Immersing her body in the water filled her with a sense of all-encompassing bliss.

Isuzu remembered hearing that her family line had kappa blood in it. Perhaps that was why it felt so good to have a wet towel on top of her head? Was that also why she liked cucumbers so much?

Ah, but never mind that. This was heaven.

“But we can’t go to public baths forever, you know?” Muse said, interrupting Isuzu’s reverie as she lowered her own lily-white frame into the bath. “This place does cost money, even if it’s only a little. And... I don’t think the cast can keep tightening their belts forever. We need to find a way to work up the money so that people can take baths whenever and for however long they want them.”

“Yes, you’re right...” Isuzu whispered, gazing up at the ceiling. “We have no money. If things don’t change soon...”

While everyone else in the park was budgeting hard—Isuzu and

Muse spending their pocket money at the public bath; Latifah sneezing as she washed herself off with cold water—Moffle, Macaron, and Tiramii were enjoying a massage at Amagi City's most luxurious spa.

"Ahh, yes! Yes! Right there, fumo!"

"Yeah... put your back into it, ron! More, more... yes, yes, yes!"

"Hey, hey, lady! You've got a nice body, mii! Can I get your email?"

The three rotund, two-heads-tall mascots were lying on the massage tables, moaning ecstatically. On top of the base entry fee of 2,500 yen, an hour-long massage was 7,000 yen; it was indulgence on a level that would make even a well-to-do salaryman think twice.

"Oh, enough! You silly boy. Don't tease an old lady!"

The middle-aged woman digging her elbow into Tiramii's back laughed, her cheeks red. She did have a nice body—good enough that she could appear in one of those commercials for sham diet products. She had probably worked really hard to maintain her figure.

"Aw, that's not true, mii! Gimme your address. I'd accept your LINE too, mii."

"Be careful, ma'am. He's a garbage fire, ron."

"Yeah, fumo. You don't want to lose your family, do you?"

Once each of the three had chimed in, the whole place burst into laughter.

Unfortunately, the woman had a husband she loved and two high school-aged children, and she had no intention of embarking on that kind of relationship with Tiramii. Still, she seemed to enjoy the flirting. The other two middle-aged masseuses laughed uproariously, and the mascots all left the massage parlor having enjoyed themselves.

"...Ahh, I feel better. What's next, ron?"

"Hmm. We've enjoyed a sauna and a massage, fumo. Next up..."

"Beer and barbecue! Kalbi! Kalbi!"

"Kalbi! Kalbi!"

"Kalbi! Kalbi!"

The three of them roared out loud, then burst into the high-class barbecue restaurant inside the spa building.

Incidentally, the money for all this luxury had come from a Satsuki Sho horse racing ticket with a 100-1 payout. Tiramii had gotten the tip, Macaron had researched it, and Moffle had put up the money. After much discussion, the three had eventually decided that splitting it three ways would be easiest—and the payout was enough that even the 300-yen-per-slice kalbi barbecue felt like a trifle.

"Ahh, feels good to be alive. I haven't indulged myself like this for a long time," Macaron said, after guzzling his beer and letting out a euphoric sigh.

"Well, fun is fun, but... I feel a little guilty, fumo."

“Mii? Why so?”

“All those things we did to get up our attendance in March has put AmaBri deep in debt, fumo. Our budget’s in real trouble...” His position of responsibility was making it hard for Moffle to fully enjoy their current situation.

“How can you be thinking about work right now? Remember where you are, ron!”

“For now, enjoy the kalbi, mii!”

“Well... I suppose you’re right, fumo.”

The three started laughing uproariously again, clinked their mugs together in a toast, and thoroughly savored the taste of the barbecue meat. They didn’t give a minute’s thought to the unhappy bathing circumstances of Latifah, Isuzu, Muse, and the others.

“Ahh, this is great, mii!”

“I’m having the time of my life! This is so much fun, ron!”



The next week, in the No. 1 building’s conference room—

“Looks like the fun’s over,” Kanie Seiya said in a gloomy voice. “We don’t have enough funds to run the park. We’re doing everything we can to secure new financing, but at this rate, we won’t even be able to give out paychecks for the month...”

Isuzu and the most of the cast slumped resignedly.

It was only the three cast members seated in one corner—Moffle, Macaron, and Tiramii—who rose from their seats with a clatter of surprise. Actually, it was Macaron and Tiramii who did that—Moffle simply crossed his plush arms, closed his eyes and muttered a “Moffu” as if he were expecting this.

“You’re not gonna pay us?! Did you say you’re not gonna pay us, ron?!”

“You can’t do this, mii! This is horrible, mii!”

The two had turned completely pale and were shouting at the tops of their voices.

“Shut up. You can’t get blood from a stone,” Seiya muttered with great irritation.

“But, but... I’ve got all kinds of bills due! My cell phone, my rent, my credit cards... this month’s paycheck was my last ray of hope, mii!”

“Same here, ron! I’m already having to live on 500 yen a day until payday... what am I going to do, ron?!”

As the two babbled over each other, Moffle scowled. “What are you talking about, fumo? We had that huge payday last week.”

“Payday? What are you talking about?”

“We won a 100-1 ticket at the Satsuki Sho race, fumo. We split it

three ways, so we each got 150,000. We even got a nice little night on the town out of it, fumo.”

The rest of the cast members leaned forward in excitement: “Wow, lucky!” and “How did you hit the jackpot?” and “Let me in on that action next time!” they buzzed.

“.....” Seiya, meanwhile, slumped over dejectedly. Mascots who were supposed to be bringing dreams to children were betting on horse races and squandering the money? It was all just so seedy.

“Macaron, Tiramii. Why are you so upset? Even after our little night out, you should have plenty left over, fumo.”

Their cute plush bodies deflated in shame.

“I lost it all on pachinko, ron...”

“I spent every night at a lingerie pub, mii...”

You two are absolute garbage, all eyes in the room seemed to say. In response, they burst out with excuses:

“But I was winning at first, ron! I thought I was on a roll after the 100-1 ticket! I thought, ‘I *have* to hit the jackpot this time,’ ron!”

“I j-just felt so bad for this one lingerie pub girl, mii! Nobody was picking her and she looked so sad and... I wanted to help her, mii!”

“That’s enough,” Isuzu ordered them. “Please be quiet.”

“Okay...” the two mascots sulked, but the threat of Isuzu’s musket quickly silenced both of them.

“...Anyway, back to the original point: we’re practically broke. And the minute we start bouncing checks or failing to pay the employees, it’s a countdown to bankruptcy. We’ll have to do some finagling to get our labor costs paid... but it’s possible that we may pay late, or in installments,” Seiya explained.

Ashe, the head of the accounting department, chimed in. “But sir, we’ll also be hiring new part-timers this month. How could we justify that to the rest of the cast? Hiring new people while their own pay is late...”

“We need those new employees no matter what.” Seiya said, firmly. “If we get can over this hurdle and keep the park alive... we’re going to need them. This is one thing I can’t give ground on.”

“But we just don’t have enough money. We can’t afford to be late in paying our employees. Someone will go running to the Labor Standards Inspection Office, and the rest will be like mice fleeing a sinking ship... ah, excuse me. I wasn’t trying to imply that you would flee, Moffle-san,” Ashe apologized, as she noticed Moffle making a face. “...Forgive me. It’s likely that we should have kept this to ourselves. If rumors get out, it will make things even worse.”

Ashe was right. Even if it was a half-assed, failing amusement park, it couldn’t afford to be late in paying its employees. Even rumors about that happening would be a huge blow; they’d be finished. It

would invalidate all the hard work they had done in March.

“Okay, I hear you,” Seiya admitted. “But we can’t put the genie back in the bottle. Consider this a top secret matter that we’re trusting you to keep to yourselves. All right?”

“.....” At Seiya’s words, the group fell silent. Perhaps that phrase —“we’re trusting you”—had united them in purpose.

“So I want to talk this out with everyone here,” Seiya continued. “What we need is 25 million yen, and we need it in the next two weeks. I’ll take any ideas you have.”

Hearing this exact number caused the group to sink even more heavily. That went far beyond anything they could scrounge up with horse racing tickets or pachinko jackpots.

“Any ideas at all. If you think of something, just throw it out there.”

Macaron tentatively raised his hoof. “Um... we could all play pachinko.”

“No. Anything else?”

“Mii. We could all bet on horses.”

“No. Get away from gambling. Anything else?”

“Moffu. We could all rob convenience stores.”

“No,” Seiya scoffed. “Even if we stole 50,000 from each, we’d still have to rob 500 stores.”

“Then how about robbing a bank?” Moffle inquired.

“No. Get away from robbery.”

“Moffu. Pyramid scheme?”

“Come on,” Seiya said exasperatedly, “nothing illegal. Anything else?”

“We could open an adult theme park!”

“Against adult entertainment business laws. Anything else?”

“Sexy doujins?”

“Only a small number of us could sell, and we couldn’t make 25 million off of it.”

“Sexy figurines?”

“Didn’t you hear what I said?”

“Hug pillows?”

“Get away from sex stuff.”

“Meet-and-greets?”

“You think anyone would want to meet or greet you?”

They spent about an hour like that, throwing out half-hearted ideas, but nothing ingenious was forthcoming.

“Seiya... no one’s going to come up with a way to earn 25 million yen on the spot, fumo.” Moffle said with an exhausted expression.

“Hmm... Well, I knew you wouldn’t.” Seiya responded flippantly. The whole group let out a groan.

“Then why did you ask, mii?! I’m awful at money stuff, mii!”

“Isn’t it your job to come up with these things, Kanie-san?!” Ashe demanded.

“Just give us an amazing miracle like last month!”

They yelled at him one after another. Seiya’s expression curdled at their presumptuousness. *What do they expect of a high schooler making 850 yen per hour?* Incidentally, 850 an hour was Tokyo’s local minimum wage. Seiya would have been happy to work for nothing, but as a matter of principle, he felt he at least had to take that much. He’d like to give them a piece of his mind about that, but he opted not to—if he told them “don’t put so much pressure on a kid like me” now, no one would ever listen to him again.

“Kanie-kun.” Isuzu sat down next to him, tugged on his sleeve and whispered in his ear.

“What?” he whispered back.

“Shouldn’t you tell them about the Malmart thing?”

“I’d better not,” he replied quietly. “I really do want any ideas I can get from them, and I also want them to feel some responsibility for what happens.”

“I see...” Isuzu murmured. She moved away and went back to taking the minutes on her laptop.

“Ah! That’s right, ron!” Macaron stood up abruptly, hitting the table with his hoof. “Dornell’s cave! Dornell’s cave!”

“Ahh... I’d forgotten about that, fumo.” Moffle tilted his head as if remembering something. Nobody else in the conference room seemed to know what they were talking about.

“What’s that?” Seiya inquired.

“It’s a cave in the second park. It’s mostly been forgotten, but we park veterans still tell a few legends about it, fumo.”

The second park was a large plot of land to the south of the highway, separate from the park that Seiya was currently running. When the bubble had burst in the early 90s, there had been plans to build a second park there, but money troubles had caused the plans to be shelved. The land was still there, but mostly untouched.

All it contained was the large stadium which they’d used the previous month. In other words, the “second park” was a park in name only, yet the cast had grown accustomed to referring to the southern plot that way.

“So, what is this cave?” Seiya wanted to know. “An attraction of some kind?”

“It’s no attraction, fumo. There’s a tunnel deep in the forest there. It’s said to have been there a long time now... it even predates the ‘Amagi Playground’ days, I’d reckon.”

“Amagi Playground” was the current park’s predecessor: Built in

the Taisho Period and enjoyed by people around Tama Ward, it had closed in the early 1970s. Then during the 1980s, Maple Land funded a renovation and reopening, and it became Amagi Brilliant Park, which it remained to this day.

“What does this cave have to do with our money troubles?” Isuzu asked.

Moffle’s gaze became distant. “Quite a while back—this was over ten years ago, fumo—we had a Fairy of Flowers named 〈Dornell〉 in our cast—”

“That’s a rugged name... It sounds like a mobile weapon.”

And he’d put it in brackets, too, like 〈Arbalest〉 or 〈Laevatein〉.

“Don’t interrupt, fumo! ...Now, one summer night, 〈Dornell〉 got drunk and ventured out into the second park, fumo. No sinister motive behind it; just a test of courage of sorts, I believe... He took a few mascots with him, and they headed for the cave deep on the grounds.”

“Incidentally, Dornell was the Fairy of Flowers two generations before mii.”

“I appreciate the footnote, fumo. But when they went into the cave for their test of courage—”

“Could you get to the point,” Seiya urged him.

“Now, hold on, fumo. This is going to sound like a fish story unless I give the proper buildup to—”

“Just get to it,” Seiya demanded.

Huffily, Moffle said, “...Apparently there’s a treasure deep in the cave system, fumo.”

Moffle and Macaron went on to explain the rest: The cave was located between two hills, deep in the virgin forests on the south end of the (planned) second park. Everyone had always assumed it was a bomb shelter from World War II.

One summer night, the subject of the cave had come up in a discussion between Tiramii’s two-generations-removed predecessor, the Fairy of Flowers Dornell, and some other members of the cast: when you really stopped and thought about it, they realized, it was odd to assume that the place was a shelter. Why would anyone need a place like that here in the mountains where nobody lived? Could it be that the cave wasn’t a shelter, but the remains of some other facility? Dornell and the others then got it in their heads to go exploring, and they headed for the cave in the second park that very night.

“That much we know for certain, fumo, because Macaron and I were at the drinking party where it happened. But, well... we’d been wanting to practice for the parade the next day, so we opted not to

join them, fumo. Thinking back now... we really should have stopped them,” Moffle intoned, solemnly.

“So, what happened then?” Seiya wanted to know.

“Dornell never came back, ron,” Macaron said, with pain in his eyes.

Apparently the two mascots who had gone in with Dornell had been found two days later in a corner of the second park, half dead. They were battered, covered in mud, and so exhausted they could barely communicate.

After they recovered, they both testified that they had come across a huge labyrinth in the cave. They had entered, still drunk, then gotten lost in the darkness. Unable to find an exit, they had pressed forward and run into all kinds of strange traps and monsters.

They spent a whole day running around, half-crazed and sipping from puddles to satisfy their thirst, before coming to the labyrinth’s deepest floor. There, they saw a dazzling hoard of treasure protected by a great dragon with glaring eyes and hot, fiery breath.

“A dragon?” Seiya asked skeptically.

“Yes, a dragon. Scales and all.”

“More tall tales...” Seiya knitted his brow in clear disbelief.

Moffle scowled in response. “I don’t exactly believe it myself, fumo... That’s just what the two who made it back said.”

“And?”

“They said Dornell was captured by the dragon and swallowed whole, fumo. The other two fled for their lives, spent a whole ’nother day wandering in the labyrinth... and finally made it to the surface, fumo.”

The park employees had immediately formed a rescue party to search for the missing Dornell. They headed for the cave in question, but they’d only gone a few meters in before they ran into a dead end.

“Now, it was an old cave to be sure, but there was no sign of a cave-in. The tunnel just reached a natural end in the mountainside. They searched all around, but they couldn’t find the way back to the labyrinth, fumo.”

“Nobody ever found out what happened to Dornell. And that brings us to today, ron.”

That was the whole story.

“...Um, so let me get this straight: a pair of drunkards told you some wild narrative about buried treasure? That’s why you subjected me to that shaggy dog story?” Seiya’s head was starting to hurt.

“I can see why you’d think that, fumo. But—”

“Mii. I brought it, just like you asked, mii!” Tiramii had left his seat earlier after a quiet word from Macaron, but he now barged into the conference room again, panting for breath. He was carrying a

small wooden box, old and darkened from age.

“What’s that?” Seiya asked.

“We’d been keeping it in the company museum, fumo. That’s a place for various trophies and pictures picked up over the park’s 30 year history. None of it’s worth anything, of course... except for this. It’s from the ‘Dornell’s cave’ incident...”

Moffle took the box and opened it. “One of the two who came back alive was gripping this coin when he was rescued, fumo.” Inside the box was a large gold coin. It was a little bit larger than a 500 yen coin, stamped with a design Seiya had never seen before, and words in a language he didn’t recognize.

“It’s from one of the magical realms, the Schubert Empire, ron. It’s a commemorative coin from about 100 years ago, and it’s worth the equivalent of 100,000 Japanese yen...”

“Wow...” Seiya picked it up with a handkerchief and scrutinized it closely. Meanwhile, Tiramii cried out in surprise at the mention of its value.

“100,000 yen?! Why didn’t you tell mii?! I’d have run off with it if I’d known!”

“And that’s why we didn’t tell you, fumo. Now, Seiya, put it back.”

“Hrm...”

Moffle took the coin from Seiya, then put it carefully back in the box and closed the lid.

“He said there was a whole mountain of gold coins like this, ron... so if the story is true, the whole treasure could be worth billions. That would clear up the park’s money troubles, wouldn’t it?”

“If it’s true. Of course, none of us knows for sure, fumo...”

That was the end of the talk about the treasure, and the conference was concluded soon after without any clear plan for taking care of their financial difficulties.

The next day, while walking the path to the second park, Isuzu addressed Seiya: “Kanie-kun. ...You didn’t really believe that story, did you?” It was just after noon. The spring sun was bright, and songbirds chirped in the trees around them. They strolled down the path as leisurely as if they were out on a picnic.

“I wouldn’t say I believed it... but that coin was real,” he admitted. “That much we know, right?”

“That’s true. I’m not an appraiser, but the writing inscribed on it was convincing.”

“I don’t believe there’s a real treasure, of course... but I am curious about that coin. And the story of a cast member going missing is upsetting... at any rate, I feel like I should have a look at this cave

of theirs.”

Just then, Isuzu turned to peer into Seiya’s face. It was a strange gaze, partly scrutinizing, partly hopeful.

“What are you staring at?” he asked.

“...Nothing,” she said. “I remember another time when you came to the second park for a similarly vague reason... to see the stadium.”

“Leave me alone. I’m not after another miraculous turnaround like that.”

“Well... I know that.”

“My concerns are mostly about the second park itself,” he said sternly. “Any problems could complicate what should be a done deal. That’s why I need to check it out before today’s meeting.”

Seiya had an important negotiation coming up at 4:00. It was top secret; aside from Isuzu, only Ashe and a few others knew about it—and he’d only told Ashe about it yesterday. To put this deal together, Seiya had spent more than two weeks taking off from school and running all around the city.

“Do you really think it will go through?” Isuzu asked him.

“It should be rock solid... The only thing that could tank it would be a major flaw in the area itself,” Seiya confirmed. “That’s my only concern here. Now, stop prying where it isn’t necessary.”

“...Very well.” She promptly fell silent, and the two continued walking down the forest path.

Seiya was wearing jeans, a thick shirt, work gloves, and hiking shoes. They were all things he didn’t mind getting dirty, just in case he might need to dig up soil or go crawling through narrow spaces. Meanwhile, Isuzu was wearing a safari shirt, hot pants, and sturdy jungle boots. She had a large backpack on, too; all-in-all, she looked more like she was on an expedition in some secluded South American or African region than scouting a commercial property.

Then, perhaps because he was alone in the forest with Isuzu, Seiya was feeling a little agitated. Things were still murky after the events around the interviews the other day, and he couldn’t stop noticing the beautiful lines of her legs which were revealed by her hot pants. He’d originally said, “I’ll go alone,” but she’d replied, “I’ll accompany you, as your secretary,” and ended up tagging along. He still couldn’t understand what she was after.

“Hey, Sento.”

“Yes?”

“Were you...” *Were you looking for a chance to be alone with me?* Seiya wondered. Should he ask it with a straight face? Like it was a joke? Like he was asking about tomorrow’s weather? He ran various simulations in his mind, but none of them seemed workable. “...No, never mind.”

"I see," she replied. "If you don't need anything, could you not talk to me?"

Then there was this. Even more inscrutable.

"We should almost be there," Isuzu announced. "...There it is."

They had covered a lot of ground, but then, they were on the grounds of an amusement park. It had taken them about ten minutes to arrive at their destination.

Tucked into the ground, between the tree-covered hills, sat a hollow of sorts. An old fence had been erected in front of the hollow. A faded sign pinned to it read "Authorized Personnel Only."

"Is that it?" Seiya asked. "But, wait..."

Three familiar mascots were crouched in front of the fence.

"Took you long enough, fumo."

"We've been waiting all day, ron."

"Let's get a move on, mii."

Moffle, Macaron, and Tiramii. The usual AmaBri triumvirate spoke up with utmost indignation. There were cigarette butts at their feet; empty plastic bottles and convenience store lunch boxes littered the ground around them. Utterly delinquent behavior—he'd have to make them clean it up later.

"What are you doing here?" Seiya demanded. "Today's a standard business day. I don't remember giving you permission to loaf around."

The three scowled immediately in response.

"Listen to him, fumo. The great acting manager!"

"It's not like we didn't have better things to do, ron. But Isuzu-chan asked us..."

"...So we came here to help out, mii. We're gonna pitch in on the search, mii."

Seiya glared at Isuzu. "Sento. Would you please explain this?"

"It's just a precaution. You heard what happened to Dornell, didn't you? What if we take a wrong turn and get lost in some strange labyrinth? We'll need support. We can't afford to lose you, you know," Isuzu said, her tone earnest.

"Look... you know I didn't actually come here looking for treasure. I just don't want any questionable places in the second park going unreported, so I wanted to scout it out. Besides, even if we do run into trouble, you expect them to be support? *These* guys? They're as unreliable as you can get. They're basically parasites."

All three scowled at this outspoken criticism.

"That's horrible, mii!"

"The impudence of youth, ron..."

"Well, well. So you still don't acknowledge my skills as the last student of Cus D'Amato and a former member of Maple Land's strike recon squad... Seiya, you really are stupid, fumo."

The three each spoke in turn.

Annoyed, Seiya just waved his hand as if to say *Fine, whatever*. “We’re on a strict timetable,” he lectured them sternly. “...It just looks like a little dip in the hillside, anyway. So stop hanging around like rubbernecks and let’s go.”

They’d investigate the little cave, find nothing, and be done with it. Then, he’d give the disappointed group a long lecture on the way back to the park. The future seemed to unfold before Seiya’s eyes. “Come on, let’s go. Just open it.”

Isuzu nodded and brought out the key to the heavy padlock on the fence.

After pushing the creaking gate open, the five of them—Seiya, Isuzu, Moffle, Macaron, and Tiramii—proceeded into the hollow.

“For the love of...” Seiya commented acerbically. “This is going to take five minutes. Why do we need all these people?”

There was, indeed, a cave there. Its entrance was hidden by the tall, wild grass. It led them into a tunnel, which extended inwardly for about ten meters before hitting a dead end.

“Okay, see?” he continued. “There’s nothing here. Clearly, it’s just an air raid shelter. Maybe the missing people tried to start a fire here. Maybe they collapsed from oxygen deprivation, or started hallucinating—”

Flashlights in hand, Moffle and the others began searching the walls.

“There’s a hidden switch, mii!” Tiramii declared.

“Uh?” Seiya blinked.

“This little rock,” Tiramii explained. “See?”

Indeed, there was a round stone about the size of a 100 yen coin embedded in the rock wall. Tiramii put his ear to the wall, then carefully moved the stone. “Hmm... it’s camouflaged, but there’s definitely a button and a lever, mii. Let’s try up, up, down, down, left, right, left, right, B, A.”

“Only people over thirty will get that joke, ron.”

“Ah, I got it, mii!”

Immediately, the dead end wall let out a rumble and began to slide open: it was a hidden door.

“This is ridiculous!” Seiya said, dumbfounded, as the three mascots squealed with glee.

“That’s the Tiramii I know. You really know what you’re doing, fumo.”

“Let’s hear it for the man who got thrown into prison for cracking the Maple Bank safe, ron!”

“Hee hee... I’m blushing, mii.”

What the hell? He has a record? Seiya thought. He would have liked

to dig deeper into this topic, but at the moment, he was more distracted by the long passage extending on past the hidden doorway. The corridor ahead curved slightly as it disappeared into darkness.

"It's an underground maze, ron! The legends were true!"

This had gotten complicated. Was it possible that the story surrounding Dornell's disappearance wasn't a complete flight of fancy? Even if he ignored the possibility of a real treasure existing, he couldn't just turn back now, pretending like this passage didn't exist.

We might as well check it out... was the shared opinion of the group, so they cautiously proceeded into the passageway. It was pitch black, but they all had flashlights, which served well for illumination.

"Strange," Isuzu whispered as she knelt down in the center of the passage.

"What is?" Seiya asked.

"There's practically no dust accumulated here. Every nook and cranny is spotless. It's impossible that no one has been here in ten years."

"Hmm..." Seiya's thoughts were interrupted by a sudden rumbling behind them. They turned in time to see the door closing.

".....!"

Tiramii was closest to the door. He sprung at it, but he was too late. The exit was sealed off by a thick rock wall. "We're trapped, mii!"

"What the hell!" Seiya fumed. "We've lost our way out!"

"Well, it's a common trope in horror and adventure movies, ron. Though I hope this is the latter and not the former..."

"Mm. If it's a horror movie, we'll be dropping like flies, fumo."

"You sound awfully calm about all this," Seiya noted. "...Hey, Tiramii! Can you get that door open?!"

Tiramii searched for another hidden switch, but it seemed he couldn't find one this time. "Hmm. No can do, mii. It must be a one-way thing."

"Grrr..." *I should have left one of them waiting outside*, Seiya thought. Now, they couldn't call for help. If they weren't careful, they would end up just like Dornell's party.

"Well, it appears we don't have a choice. Let's proceed," Isuzu said, pulling out her usual musket. Seiya would have liked to ask why it was mounted with a Picatinny rail running a tactical light parallel to the barrel, but since it was hardly the time for him to comment on his companions' personal belongings, he just followed along without a word.

After proceeding for a time through the dark passageway, they came to a large hall: it was about the size of a school classroom, with

a ceiling two stories up.

“A dead end?” Seiya wondered.

“No, look closer. There’s a large door there, fumo.”

He hadn’t noticed it in the dark, but there was indeed a large stone door ahead. It was decorated with sinister motifs and unfamiliar writing, and at the center was an engraving of a face reminiscent of an oni or a devil.

“I’ve never seen this style before...” Seiya commented.

“It resembles ruins I’ve seen in the Schubert Empire,” Isuzu replied. “I believe the engraving in the center is one of their gods.”

The Schubert Empire was one of the magical realms, different from the one that Isuzu and Moffle called home. Seiya had heard it was the parent entity of Cosmic Studios in Osaka.

“Schubert... I recognize the name, at least,” he said. “Are they evil, or something?” With a name like that, it was hard not to imagine them as some kind of isekai novel dictatorship.

“Nah, they’re just like anyone. They’ve got an over-the-top design sensibility, but that’s all, fumo. Their main industries are forestry and farming, and they make a mean maitake mushroom tempura.”

“...They call themselves an empire, and that’s what they’re best known for?” Seiya objected incredulously. “They might as well be the Yuzawa Hot Springs.”

“We won’t be able to proceed until we open this door,” Isuzu observed. “There must be a hidden switch somewhere...”

Isuzu had just taken a few steps forward, when suddenly, laughter began to echo throughout the hall. It was a muffled, ominous sound that seemed to reverberate upwards from the ground—a mocking laugh that could chill the blood of anyone who heard it.

“Wh-What the...?!”

“I’m scared, mii! I’m scared, mii!”

“I’m terrified, ron... it’s almost like... almost like an Alien Baltan!”

“Enough,” Seiya said.

Before the terrified group, the fierce eyes of the demonic door flashed with white light. 《I am the Guardian of the Door!》 the door boomed, its voice rich with gravitas. 《I now address the adventurers who, foolishly, challenge our labyrinth! Peril awaits you beyond this door! If you fear not my wrath, nor a catastrophic end... then stand you before these stone coffins!》

Just then, sections of the flagstone began to pull back, and seven stone coffins rose up in front of the door.

“Frikin’ sweet, mii! Listen to that rumble!”

“Retractable, eh? That’s stylish presentation, fumo.”

“I want a rig like that, ron.”

“How can you all be so calm about all this?” Seiya demanded.

Each of the coffins had a different symbol engraved on it, representing, from right to left: “Fire,” “Wind,” “Metal,” “Earth,” “Flowers,” “Water,” and “Lightning.”

《Make these a mirror of yourselves! Follow your hearts to the coffins of your choice, and receive in turn a weapon that shall slay the monsters ahead!》

The group stood for a moment, taken aback.

“Huh? Hold on... are you saying we each choose a coffin, and we get some kind of weapon from it, mii?”

“That would be the face-value interpretation...” Seiya said thoughtfully.

“Fire, wind, metal, earth, flowers, water, and lightning... interesting selection, fumo. Don’t these things usually use the five elements?”

“This is more like Ninja Captor.”

“Another ancient reference...”

《Follow your hearts to the coffins of your choice!》 the door cried again. They got the impression that he was trying to prod them along, so hesitantly, they each took their place in front of one of the coffins.

Seiya ended up in front of the central “Earth” coffin, while Isuzu ended up at “Water.”

Moffle took “Lightning” at the far end, while Macaron chose “Metal”... and, despite being the Fairy of Flowers, Tiramii’s own choice was “Fire.”

That left “Flowers” and “Wind” untaken, but with only five of them present, there were bound to be two left out.

《Now, take in hand your weapons of destiny!》 the door instructed.

The covers of the coffins slid off with a rumble. Inside of each was a weapon: Muffle’s “Lightning” produced a stun gun; Macaron’s “Metal” was a metal bat, and Tiramii’s “Fire” apparently represented Molotov cocktails.

“100,000 volts, eh? Quite a kick, fumo.”

“You can kill a man pretty easily with a metal bat, ron.”

“A Molotov cocktail can take out a whole squad of riot police, mii!”

They all seemed surprisingly pleased with their weapons.

“With all that buildup, I thought we’d be getting magic swords or something... Why do I feel like you’re about to be arrested for armed unlawful assembly?” Seiya thought out loud. It felt unsettling, like he was dealing with a crowd of delinquents.

“Fine words from a man holding a shovel, fumo.”

“Because I chose ‘Earth,’ I guess...” Seiya lamented. “Maybe I

should have given it a little more thought.”

“Isuzu-chan! What’s your weapon, mii?”

“Well...” Isuzu, who had chosen “Water,” held up a palm-sized bottle with a scowl. “There seems to be some kind of fluid inside... there’s a label, too. ‘KY’? Is it some kind of potion, perhaps?”

“.....” The mascots fell into sudden, hushed silence.

“Why did you go quiet?” Isuzu demanded to know. “Do you know what it is?”

“Um, er...”

“I don’t really get it, ron. I don’t know how *that* could be a weapon...”

“It could be a kind of weapon, depending on how you use it, mii...”

They commented evasively to each other.

“...? I don’t understand,” Isuzu objected.

“Well, Google it if you’re curious, ron...”

“What a trashy-ass labyrinth, mii...”

Seiya frowned, being just as in the dark as Isuzu was. “What are you all going on about? Is it poison? A healing potion? Just say it alr—” Before he could finish, he was cut off again.

The door in front of them began to yawn open while the stone coffins retracted into the floor. It seemed to be saying “Go forth!”

《Proceed now, adventurers! Let those weapons clear your path ahead!》 the door intoned. Beyond it were several branching flagstone passageways, as the maze continued far into the distance.

“What should we do, Kanie-kun?” Isuzu asked.

“How should I know?” he retorted. “But we don’t seem to have much of a choice... Let’s go.”

They couldn’t turn back now, after all. Still, Seiya couldn’t shake the nagging concern that they were walking into a situation that would require weapons.

Seiya and the others proceeded through the maze. Each fork in the road led to a lot of arguing about whether they should go left or right. Since they could never agree, they decided to follow Isuzu’s suggestion of letting a stick fall one way or the other to choose their path for them.

“It says right,” she announced.

“Right, then, fumo. Well, let’s get going, and make it snappy. I was hoping to catch the Giants game with a beer when I got home, fumo. Hurry, hurry.”

“Hey, don’t push me!” Seiya cried.

“I can’t really see where I’m walking, ron... ew, I just stepped in something gooey.”

“There’s also a weird smell, mii... Like squid or something...”

Just then... With a loud *snicker-snack*, a blade flew out of the wall. It swept sideways in a flash at just about Seiya’s head height.

“!!” Like a reaper’s scythe, the blade cut an arc for Macaron and Tiramii. It grazed the tops of their heads, then disappeared into the wall again.

“Wow...”

Had they been human height, they would have been decapitated. The whole group stood there, dumbstruck at the sudden event. Macaron and Tiramii were staring, jaws dropped, from where they were now sitting on the floor.



“Wh-What... was that?” Seiya whispered weakly.

Moffle carefully investigated the wall. “Seems to be a trap, fumo. One rigged to go off when you stepped on a certain flagstone.”

“I know that!” Seiya said. “But that... that could have killed them!”

“Yeah. It was a real close shave, fumo.” Moffle’s voice remained calm.

It was said that trained soldiers better kept their calm in direct proportion to the urgency of their situation, and Seiya was seeing a live demonstration of that now. If only he weren’t a super-deformed rodent mascot...

“Moffu... we’ll need to proceed with caution, fumo. ...Tiramii?”

“M-Mii?”

“You’re our point man, fumo. Keep an eye out for traps. The minute you see one, warn us and disarm it.”

“O-Okay. I’ll do my best, mii.”

“Macaron, you’re our tail gunner. Watch our backs, fumo.”

“...Got it, ron.”

“Isuzu, you stay in the middle, fumo. Guard the load.”

“Yes sir, General, sir.” Isuzu pulled out her musket, grabbed Seiya’s shoulder and pulled him towards her.

While a little disoriented over Moffle’s sudden turn for the militant, Seiya found the presence of mind to object. “Hold on a minute, now. Set up ranks if you want to, but what did you mean by ‘the load’? Was that supposed to be a reference to me?”

“Stop whining and do what I tell you, fumo,” Moffle grumbled in annoyance.

“No, I won’t let that one slide! The brilliant, omni-talented, handsome Kanie Seiya will not be referred to as ‘the load’! Especially not by a weird, surly rodent like you!”

“Geh... ‘weird rodent,’ fumo? I’m trying to keep you safe because we need you to run the park, fumo! Even though you’re a smart-aleck brat!”

“I can keep myself safe! I’m just sick of you always looking down on—” Seiya took a step forward in anger, then heard something *clack* beneath his foot. “Er... was that a *clack*?”

Somewhere out of sight, mechanisms began roaring to life. A large machine had activated in the dark of the tunnel beyond.

“Did you step on something, mii? Kanie-kun, did you step on something, mii?!”

“W-Well, I... might have, but I—”

A rumble echoed through the corridor. The whole group cringed. Then, out of the tunnel from which they had come, a huge boulder

started rolling towards them, on a path to crush them all.

“Thank goodness, ron! It’s an adventure story! See?”

“Now’s not the time!” Seiya bellowed.

“Run, fumo!”

“W-Wahh! Waaaah!”

All they did for the next few minutes was scream. There was no attempt at a formation; the five of them just ran and ran, mindlessly. And, in their retreat from the massive pursuing boulder, they triggered switch after switch.

Swarms of arrows shot out from the wall.

“Miiii!”

Holes opened up in the floor.

“Rooooon!”

The ceiling crashed down upon them.

“Moffu! Moooooooffu!”

There was no sense of coordination or teamwork. They all just ran, dodged, flailed, and avoided the various traps with truly miraculous timing.

“Kanie-kun. I would recommend that we stop for a time,” Isuzu said to Seiya, who was jumping and ducking to avoid the many traps assailing him.

“Stand still?! Don’t be ridiculous! How are we supposed to stand still when there are traps all aro—what?!”

A buzzsaw made a beeline for Isuzu and Seiya. After just barely dodging, Seiya staggered, then ended up falling into the wall behind him. That triggered a giant spiked ball that roared through the air right for him.

“Gwaaah!” There was nothing he could do. It was going to hit him. Cringing, Seiya resigned himself to his fate. But just before the ball struck, Isuzu jumped in from the side and knocked Seiya out of the way.

“Sento?!”

They’d managed to avoid a direct hit as a result, but one of the spikes had caught her jacket and thrown her roughly forward, sending her tumbling helplessly along the stone floor.

“.....” She was rolling right for a newly opened pitfall. Without any chance to stop herself—or even enough time to scream—Isuzu fell into the hole.

“Sento?!”

The hole covered over. A new rain of arrows fired off at him. Seiya tried jumping at the floor where she had fallen, but Moffle grabbed him and dragged him back.

“Let me go!” Seiya yelled. “Sento is...”

“Save it!” Moffle told him.

“She fell! I need to help—”

“What we need to do is run, fumo!” Seiya was dragged away by Moffle.

Once things had finally settled a bit, they were able to notice that there were three of them where there had been five before. Seiya, Moffle, and Tiramii were the only ones left.

“When did we lose Macaron, mii?” Tiramii asked, panting for breath.

“They’ve really got us on the ropes, fumo. I don’t even know which way we came from...” Moffle spat.

“Sento...” Seiya had done nothing but whisper her name. When the spiked ball trap had targeted him, Isuzu had put herself at risk to push Seiya out of the way. Then, because of that, she had—

“Let’s save our worries for next week, fumo,” Moffle said. “Our first priority is getting out of this maze. Once we call for help, we can use heavy equipment to tear the place apart, fumo.”

“I know that. I know that, but...” Seiya whispered, despairingly.

Meanwhile, Tiramii was looking around. “There don’t seem to be any traps here, mii. I think we’re getting closer to the center of the maze.”

“What makes you say that, fumo?”

“I’ve got a bead on the thought process of whoever designed the maze, mii. I think he wants to keep maintenance and hard work to a minimum. That’s why none of the traps were things like poison gas or bombs that would take a long time to reset, mii.”

“Hrm...” Typically, Tiramii did nothing but spout idiocy, but for once, he seemed to be in his element. Seiya was starting to believe that he could have been a safe-cracker, at one time.

“They set up big, flashy traps in the outer maze for purposes of shock and awe, mii. You use automatic traps to thin out the weakest of the herd, but for those they can’t stop...” Tiramii hummed, scowling, and tilted his head. “...they’ll stop using traps, and come to finish them personally.”

“Personally?” Seiya asked.

Just then, the sound of howling voices began to echo through the maze. The hallway where they were taking a breather—actually, it was more like a large chamber than a hallway—was soon filled with orcs.

Orcs... That was the only way Seiya could describe them: savage-looking demihumans with the heads of pigs and the bodies of men. Wearing leather armor and holding clubs and cleavers, they looked as if they’d stepped straight out of an RPG. They glared venomously at Seiya’s group, drooling and twitching their pig noses.

“Looks like it’s monster-bashing time, mii. See those menacing

stances? They're not in any mood for a parlay, mii."

"Well, it stands to reason. It's a dungeon, fumo. This comes with the territory..."

Moffle and Tiramii both readied their weapons.

"How can you be so calm?!" Seiya screamed. "They're here to kill us! And it's three of us against a horde of them!"

"Still, we gotta do it, mii."

"Save your yellow-bellied comments for later, fumo!"

"Ngh..."

As each mascot spoke, he entered a battle stance. Then, before Seiya could argue with Moffle, the orcs raised their weapons and fell on them, spittle flying. The battle began.

"Incoming!" Moffle leaped out in front with a war cry. Using light steps and punches, he laid out the orcs. Two, three, four—one after another, they fell.

"Take this, mii!" Tiramii threw a Molotov cocktail. The flames spread immediately, sending the orcs into chaos. Then, while they were routed, Tiramii delivered a series of finishing blows from behind. If this were an MMO, he'd be a DPS attacker.

"Damn it! How did we end up in this situation?" Seiya shouted, as he used his shovel to smash at the enemies that Moffle and Tiramii had scattered.

"Oh-ho. Not bad at all, fumo," Moffle hummed as he finished a KO of another enemy set.

"And you're pretty relaxed for a rat!" Seiya returned the compliment. "Also, didn't you have a stun gun?!"

"Hmph, stun gun? That's a women's self-defense weapon, fumo. You think that can beat my right hook?"

"I... I see..." Seiya answered weakly.

"Bring it on, mii! Eat Molotov cocktails, mii! Today's the day that you die, mii!" Tiramii shouted, but while the lines might sound brave coming from anyone else, there was something off-putting about hearing them shouted by a plush mascot modeled after an adorable toy dog.

They fought and they fought, but the enemies kept coming. At first it was just the orcs, but soon, it was more and more powerful monsters: trolls and golems; slimes and ropers. It was all so—

"It's all so retro and insanely hard!" Seiya wailed.

Seiya's arms were getting tired from swinging the shovel around. The roper, not about to ignore an opening from the exhausted young man, fell on him immediately with its tentacles. Moffle managed to punch the monster out just in time with a straight right punch, narrowly avoiding a tentacle fetish scene.

"Tentacle play on a man? Who would enjoy that, fumo?!"

“But we’d have a field day if Isuzu-chan were here, mii... Imagine her bound up by a roper, shouting ‘noooooo~~~’...”

“But this situation...” Seiya observed with exhaustion. “It seems a little bit like a pile-on, doesn’t it?”

“More are coming, fumo!”

Now, they faced new kinds of enemies: bird-like wyverns that looked like giant ostriches; white eyeless wyverns that used lightning attacks; and even swift wyverns that looked like giant black cats.

This was bad. It was *authoritatively* bad.

“Run!” Tiramii bleated. “If we fight these guys too long and they end up doing an illustration of this—”

“Withdraw! Withdraw, fumo!”

They ran, senseless, out of the area.

After falling into the pit trap, Sento Isuzu slid down a slope that jerked her back and forth in the dark before depositing her in some random room. Her consciousness was blurry.

She’d knocked Seiya out of the way so abruptly. Was he okay? *In a chaotic scene like that, it’s hard to know if I made the right decision. I hope he’s well... what will we do if anything’s happened to him? He’s important to the park, and important to m—*

“Ugh...”

While she lay there in a daze, she sensed a large number of somethings entering the room. They surrounded Isuzu, whispering to each other.

“A human! It’s been so long, mogu...”

“Wait, mogu. She’s from Maple Land...”

“Wherever she’s from, we can’t just let her go...”

She felt herself being placed on something like a stretcher and moved. The shadows of crooked shapes could be seen projected onto the walls of the maze. About the size of children, the things whispered to each other in words she couldn’t quite make out as they carried her along.

She drifted out of consciousness again. She must have been out for about fifteen minutes, because when she woke up, she was lying on a bare-bones bed.

“Where am I?” she asked.

It appeared to be a small, dark room with walls of stone and a door of sturdy iron bars. She was in a prison.

“Isuzu-chan? Are you awake now, ron?” She looked up to see Macaron sitting nearby, his back up against the prison wall. “I fell into a pit trap too, ron. Looks like they brought me here while I was unconscious.”

“They?” she inquired. “They who?”

“Don’t know, ron. They were small, looked like moles... I think there were at least five of them. I’ve never seen anything like them in the AmaBri cast.”

“They didn’t seem to be Maple Land subjects.” She sat up in bed and shook her head. She wasn’t injured badly—just a little bruised—but she desperately wanted a shower. The cell was dusty and reeked of mold; it made her nauseous.

“It’s an underground maze that’s gone untouched for over ten years,” she commented. “Why would anybody be living here?”

“Good question. It’s clear that some magical realm had to create this maze dungeon... but we’re under the second park, ron.” As he spoke, Macaron pulled a cigarette out of nowhere and lit it with a Zippo. His brand was Marlboro, as usual.

“...Could you at least ask me before you smoke?” Isuzu objected.

“Oh, excuse me, little miss. May I smoke, ron?”

“No,” she replied shortly.

“Ahh. I’m sorry to offend you, ron.” But, despite his apology, Macaron kept smoking. He seemed to have no intention of putting out his cigarette whatsoever.

Isuzu had been at AmaBri for a year, but she still didn’t know Macaron very well. She knew that he mainly spent time with Moffle and Tiramii, and that he was an insufferable fool who was always doing stupid things, but from time to time he showed a dignified side (though he lacked Moffle’s keen insight). There were many members of the cast who were intimidated by Isuzu’s personality, but Macaron seemed to enjoy teasing her.

He didn’t seem afraid of having a woman hate him, either... *Was that it?* she wondered. *Was it the confidence of a man with a child and an ex-wife... the confidence of a mature adult?*

Still grinning in that sarcastic way of his, Macaron savored a few more puffs off his cigarette, then put it out with a leisurely motion. It would look quite stylish if it was being done by a handsome older man, but for the woolly sheep mascot, it all just seemed a bit strange.

“Well, anyway... we can’t stay locked up in this cell forever, ron,” Macaron wandered up to the bars. “This lock—it looks like a simple padlock, ron. If only Tiramii were here. He’d get it open easily enough...”

“Do you have anything you can use to break it?”

“Nothing. All I have is my wallet, my house key, my smartphone and—”

While Macaron muttered to himself, Isuzu pulled her musket from her thigh and blew off the padlock. The sound of the gunshot echoed through the prison.

“Will that do?” she inquired.

Stunned, Macaron let out an appreciative whistle. “That’s my girl, ron. Let’s get going.”

Even as they got out of the cell, there was no sign of any guards coming for them. Surprising, since the gunshot had been rather loud...

“Strange...” she observed.

“Maybe Moffle and the others are making trouble out there, ron. They’ve had to divert all their forces elsewhere...”

“Even so, one would expect that it would trigger an alarm, at least,” Isuzu noted.

“Hmm...”

The corridor was lined with cells along either side. There seemed to be over twenty rooms. One way led to an immediate dead end, while the other led to a sturdy-looking iron door in the distance.

They decided to walk towards the door.

But before they’d taken more than a few steps, they realized that there was another prisoner present. About three cells down from the cell they had been in, someone had coughed.

“...?” Finding it strange, they peered into the cell.

The first thing they saw were three LCD monitors of varying sizes, followed by a desktop PC, a Blu-ray recorder, and a variety of game systems. A laptop PC had been tossed haphazardly onto the bed, and the desk was lined with a massive collection of figures, made up of girls and robots in a roughly 30-70 ratio. Bookshelves filled with manga, DVDs, and games lined the walls, and any and all empty spaces were occupied with idol and pro wrestling posters.

The room’s sole occupant was facing the monitors, his back to them. He was a short, stout creature about three heads tall. His chair was made from what looked like high-quality mesh, and had an ergonomic design.

“Ohh... an Aeron Chair, ron. Pro manga artists and animators love those. Wish I had one...”

“Is now really the time to be envious?” Isuzu demanded. “What on earth is...”

It was definitely a prison cell, but it had been transformed into a room that any bachelor otaku would sigh in envy at. By contrast, when the female Isuzu looked at it—well, if she ever happened to find herself a boyfriend, and had gone to his room wearing her best underwear and ready to take the plunge, this was the very definition of a sight she would have hoped not to see inside.

And ah, look there—a floor littered with empty plastic bottles and empty Amazon boxes! It was the height of debauchery.

“What are you babbling about out there, nell? It’s too early for lunch...” With an air of annoyance, the room’s occupant swiveled around in his expensive chair to face them.

He was a mascot with plush, khaki-colored fur, who looked like a three-heads-tall weasel. Isuzu felt like she had seen him before, though she couldn't quite place him.

But Macaron cried out immediately: "Wait, aren't you... Dornell?!"

Dornell: he was one of the cast members who'd gotten lost in the maze so long ago. Those who had made it back had testified that he'd been snatched by a dragon and swallowed whole.

Dornell squinted at Macaron. "Hmm? Aren't you... Macaron, nell? The new blood at the Music Theater?"

"I was new a long time ago, ron. I'm a veteran now."

"Ahh... true, I've been here for a while, nell. That's okay, though." Dornell sat up a little and waved his stubby hand.

"You are... Dornell, then? What on earth are you doing here?" Isuzu asked.

In response, Dornell pointed to the LCD monitor behind him. "What does it look like? I'm reading blogs, nell. Stuff like: 'Why do light novels have such long names these days?' And such."

"That isn't what I meant," Isuzu said. "You've been missing for over ten years, haven't you? I'm trying to ask what you've been doing all this time."

"Not that I mind explaining that... but who are you, nell?"

"I'm Sento Isuzu, the secretary to the park's acting manager. Tell me, then: what exactly have you been doing here all this time?"

"What do you think? I've been a prisoner, nell."

"For over ten years? Here?!"

Isuzu and Macaron both stared at him.

"Yeah. They've got a rule here: if you're captured, you gotta stay until your friends come for you. My friends never came, so I've been here the whole time, nell. I told 'em I was bored, so they rigged me up an internet connection... and between playing games and building plamodels and watching anime... I guess I managed to fill the time and then some, nell."

"You've spent ten years like this?"

"Yep, that's what it comes down to. ...Say, I'm hungry." Dornell picked up the phone on his desk. "...Hey, it's me. Could you bring in some snacks? Yeah... how 'bout some karamucho. And oolong tea. And three cups, nell."

He finished his unceremonious request, returned the phone to its cradle, then waddled up to the bars. He opened the cell door with a clink and beckoned them in. "Come on in, nell. It's kind of a mess, sure, but..."

"It's not locked, ron?"

"Yeah. We all got sick of dealing with it."

"....." What on earth was happening here?

Macaron and Isuzu, who had been raring to escape just moments ago, entered Dornell's cell(?) with an air of complete deflation. The weasel mascot pushed some empty Amazon boxes aside, revealing two tatami chairs upon which he urged them to sit. Trepidatiously, they accepted his offer.

"Dornell. Everyone in the park thinks you're missing, ron. Frankly, we assumed you were dead."

"Ahh. Well, that figures," Dornell said indifferently.

"Your co-workers were worried. And it's not good for someone to stay in a place like this for so long, ron. Why didn't you let the park know you were okay, ron?"

"Oh. Well at first, I was just gonna use my captivity as a long vacation, nell. But I managed to craft a pretty ideal environment here, as you can see... and then I got addicted to this MMO they were beta testing... and before I knew it, a year had passed."

"What's an MMO?" Isuzu, who knew very little about video games, asked.

"It's an online game, ron. Now that he mentions it, there *was* a boom in those massive time-sink types around then..."

"It felt a little awkward to contact the park after a whole year, so I just wiled my time away here instead... to be frank, I really settled in, nell. They bring me all the food I can eat, and I can order pretty much anything else I want online..."

He's trash, Isuzu realized. She was in the presence of yet another piece of absolute garbage.

"Ahh, I see. MMOs can be trouble, ron. I hear Narukawa-san himself wasted a year on *Lineage II*, ron."

"Who?" Dornell questioned.

"But here's what I can't figure out, ron. You've been hidden down here for all these years. Why didn't you end up fading out due to *monos*?"

"Dunnell. I think it's because I got popular playing as a girl online."

"Ridiculous!" Macaron scoffed.

"Anyway, I like the life I have now, nell. You can have your tea, but when you're done, I hope you'll go home and leave me here, nell."

"Go home? We can get out of here?" Isuzu and Macaron both pounced on the phrase.

"Sure, probably," Dornell shrugged. "Never tried it myself, of course."

"But where exactly did this maze come from?" Isuzu said, pressing him for details. "You asked someone for tea earlier, and someone's bringing you those game systems and computers... There's so much I don't understand. Would you mind enlightening us?"

“Ohh, well—” Just as he was about to begin, another creature appeared in the cell. It was a little mole-like mascot carrying a tray with a bottle of oolong tea, cups, and snack treats.

“Mr. Customer, sir. We’ve brought your tea, mog.”

“Thanks a million!” Dornell opened the cell door and took the tea and snacks like a patron interacting with an attendant in a karaoke parlor.

Isuzu and Macaron both stared, then sighed simultaneously: “...‘Customer’?”

Seiya, Moffle, and Tiramii were in a corner of the maze, panting and trying to calm themselves down.

They’d had to fight back minor enemies, run from mid-bosses, dodge bizarre traps, solve block puzzle mini-games within time limits to open doors... At the end of it, they were all battered and exhausted.

They had given their enemies the slip for now, it seemed, but they could end up in combat again at any time.

“Pant... pant... The last time I used a shovel this much was... never, actually,” Seiya moaned. “You guys might be into this yakuza stuff, but I’m a manager, remember?! A white-collar worker!”

“A white-collar worker, at 850 yen per hour? Ridiculous, fumo. You’re more cut out to clean ditches, fumo.” Moffle wheezed. As tough and strong as he was, even he couldn’t hide his exhaustion.

“Clean ditches, huh?” Seiya scoffed in return. “Sounds more like a job for a sewer rat like you.”

“Hahh... hahh... could you guys save the banter for a less crucial time, mii? I hate Hollywood clichés, mii...” As he spoke, Tiramii rooted around in his pouch. “Bad news, mii. I’m out of Molotovs. Maybe I have some chemical fertilizer lying around... with a nitric acid base, I could probably concoct *something* explosive...”

“Could the Fairy of Flowers please refrain from discussing explosive fertilizer?” Seiya requested.

“Fair enough, mii... It’s just, I’ve always wanted to make a big boom and then say: ‘heh, dirty fireworks!’”

“I thought you hated Hollywood clichés, fumo.”

“A-Anyway... We need to figure out where we are.” Leaning on his shovel like a walking stick, Seiya picked himself up.

He checked his watch and saw that it was past 2:30 pm. This wasn’t good; there were only 90 minutes left until the meeting. *The meeting!* Seiya despaired. *So much more important than this stupid dungeon dive!*

“I didn’t have time to memorize which path we took when,” he admitted, “so I have no idea where we are right now. I can get an idea of the direction we’re facing, but—” Seiya pulled out his smartphone

and checked his compass app. Moffle peered at his smartphone screen from the side.

“Moffu. So this way is north, fumo. Then I’d reckon we must be... ugh, I don’t know.”

“If I’d known this would happen, I would have installed a pedometer app, but... hmm?” Seiya’s brow knitted. The smartphone’s Wi-Fi window opened and prompted him to choose a network.

LAN connections are available? he wondered. *This deep underground?* The network names were “mogmog001” and “mogmog002.” It wasn’t a weak signal, either: he was getting three bars. Unfortunately, both networks required a password.

It didn’t make sense. Was it possible they were fairly close to the surface, and a wireless connection happened to be passing through a nearby cavern?

“I’m not detecting any caverns like that, mii...” Tiramii said, while searching the surrounding walls.

While he did that, Seiya tried as many passwords as he could think of, but none of them worked. “Ugh... if we could only connect, we could check our current location and ask for help...”

“Tiramii. Can’t you do anything, fumo?”

“I doubt it, mii. It’s not like I’m a super hacker. Dammit!”

For a moment, he thought he’d found a way out of this, but it seemed their chances of calling for help on the internet were nil. He checked the time; he’d wasted five minutes messing around like this.

“Seiya. You’ve been checking the time an awful lot, fumo. Is there a problem?”

“...I had a meeting to get to. I can’t afford to be late.”

“We’re trapped in a dungeon, and you’re worried about *work*? Miish, I knew you were a workaholic, but still...”

Just then, they heard a crowd of footsteps from the corridor ahead. They were accompanied by dangerous metal scraping sounds, shrieks and growls.

A horde of enemies was heading this way.

“Ugh... they caught up to us again,” Seiya groaned.

“I feel I ought to remind you that I’m out of Molotovs, mii!”

“We don’t have a choice. Let’s run further in, fumo!” Moffle took off running.

“Further in?” Seiya questioned. “What good will that do us?!”

“None, but staying here to fight will waste time and energy, fumo!” Moffle was, of course, correct. With no alternatives, Seiya and Tiramii ran after him.

But the enemies weren’t only coming from behind. They rushed at them from ahead, too, and poured out from around corners.

“There’s more?!”

“We’ll have to bust through, fumo!”

They smashed into the enemy mass, punching, kicking, throwing—they ran right, ran left, climbed up and jumped down. They did it over and over and over again, until at last they came out into a straightforward hallway. The mobs of minor enemies didn’t let up for a second.

“They’re so damned stubborn!”

Half crawling, half scrambling, Seiya and the others rushed down the hallway, kicked down a large door and leaped inside. The enemy was hot on their heels.

“Shut it! Shut the door!”

They shoved closed the double-doors that Moffle and Tiramii had just kicked open, and then Seiya used his shovel as a bar through the handles.

“...!”

They were just in the nick of time. The enemy slammed into the door behind them. It shook, but didn’t open. The slam was followed by a persistent banging on the door, but for now, their pursuers seemed to be trapped on the other side. They’d probably break through eventually, but it would hold for a while, at least.

“Let’s get some distance while we can!” Wiping at the sweat dripping from his chin, Seiya hurried away from the door.

But Moffle and Tiramii didn’t move. They were staring deeper into the room—Seiya only just realized that it was a room—with their backs to him.

“Hey, what are you doing? Hurry up and—”

In fact, it was less a room and more a great banquet hall. It was about half as wide as a school gymnasium, and three stories tall, at the least. The walls and pillars were decorated with ominous carvings, and regularly-placed braziers cast eerie shadows across them.

In the very back of the chamber lay a dragon.

A dragon! He was the size of a ten-wheeler, with legs as thick as trees, and covered all over with dazzling crimson scales. On his back were wings large enough to cover the whole chamber at full extension.

Slowly, the dragon raised his spiky head to look down on the petrified party.

“Oh, come on... what are we supposed to do now, fumo?” Moffle whispered weakly.

“We’re trapped...” Seiya admitted.

They were exhausted. They were out of real weapons. And behind them, a massive horde of monsters was still trying to break the door down. Defeating the dragon in front of them seemed to be the only way to proceed.

A “level boss”... In a properly designed dungeon, there would be a room before this one with healing items or buffs, or at least a save point.

Tiramii spoke to Moffle in a terrified whisper, his fur standing on end: “Hey, Moffle... this isn’t that Arkhangelsk, is it?”

“No,” Moffle whispered back. “That was a typhoon-class dragon—much bigger, with black and silver scales, fumo. Besides, I took one of its eyes out, and more importantly...” Moffle clenched his paw into a fist. “...Idina slew that one, fumo.”

“R-Right, mii...”

What are they talking about? Seiya wondered. He found their conversation completely opaque. Actually, he did feel like he had an idea of what they meant, but he didn’t have time to think about it now.

The dragon let out a low growl, then spoke. 《Small ones...》

Tiramii cried out, “It can talk! The lizard can talk, mii!”

And a chibi dog that can talk is normal? Seiya thought wryly, but opted not to interject.

《Small ones... Why have you disturbed my slumber?》 His majestic voice resounded throughout the room. At the very least, he didn’t seem about to fall on them immediately.

《I am the red dragon, Rubrum. Answer me. Why have you disrupted my slumber?》

“What should we do, fumo?” Moffle whispered.

“How should I know?” Seiya asked rhetorically, also keeping his voice low. “We’ll just have to talk to him.”

“Go for it, mii. You’re the negotiator, Kanie-kun.”

“Huh? ...Ugh.”

Moffle also seemed to be looking at him as if to say, “do something already.” Seiya had to admit that he couldn’t imagine much good coming from leaving the negotiations to the mascots. So, with no other choice, he took a step forward and cleared his throat. “Ah... red dragon Rubrum, was it? We recognize that we woke you up... and we apologize. You see, we didn’t have any choice but to flee to this room...”

The red dragon growled and glared straight at Seiya. His eyes alone were the size of watermelons.

“...Er, what I mean to say is... we got lost. We’re missing two of our friends, too. We’d like it if you’d let us recover them, then help us find a way back to the surface... well, then we could get back to work, you could get back to sleep... it seems like a win-win proposition.”

The dragon let out a series of staccato growls.

“Y-You made him mad, mii!”

“I think that was laughter, fumo.”

The two mascots hid behind Seiya like a riot shield as they spoke.

《Win-win? Win-win, you say? ...Don't make me laugh. I know what you are, small one. You came here to steal my treasure hoard, did you not?》

“Certainly not! I'm the park's acting manager, you see, and I was just investigating one of the park's old facilities.”

Even as he spoke, Seiya found it suspicious. The dragon spoke of a treasure hoard, but there was nothing treasure-like anywhere in the chamber. The survivors of the Dornell incident had spoken of the dragon and the treasure being in the same room.

“Y-You know about the amusement park on the surface, don't you? We're members of its staff. I don't know how this maze got here, but running a dungeon on our property... ah, it's a bit illegal, don't you think? If you won't cooperate, I'll have to refer this matter to the park's legal department!”

“Now he's bringing in the legal department...” Moffle muttered under his breath. “What kind of negotiation is this, fumo?”

“He's gotta treat this guy like the black market operator he is, mii...”

“Shut up!” Seiya hissed at them both.

The dragon let out another growl, this time more thoughtfully.

《Small one. I do not believe your story. Many sneak-thieves, in their desperation, have made similar excuses.》

“Ah, then... here. Here! My park ID! Do you believe me now?!” Seiya held up the cast ID card hanging from his neck.

《Heh... you think that you can fool me with that meaningless scrap? Me, a being born in the days of antiquity? Me, traveler of the ten realms, with knowledge to surpass mortal men?!》

“That all sounds very impressive, but this card is still real!”

《Foolish one... You shall pay for your lies!》 the dragon growled.

In that instant, the door behind them broke, and the monsters rushed in. Shrieking and jeering and banging their weapons and shields, they formed a semicircle around the group.

“This is bad, mii!”

“Moffu! We'll just have to take out as many as we can...”

Tiramii started crying, while Moffle readied his fists. But Seiya stayed Moffle's hand, turned to the dragon, and raised his voice...

“Hey, dragon! Rubrum, or whatever! You said something about ‘knowledge to surpass mortal men,’ right? Well, I find that laughable!”

The monster rabble had been about to charge, but one growl from the dragon and they all stepped back. 《...Small one. What was it you just said to me?》

“I think you're lying about how much you know,” Seiya accused.

“You're just a NEET holed up in a cave! I probably know more than

you do!”

“K-Kanie-kun, maybe you shouldn’t provoke him like—mmgh.”

Moffle stopped Tiramii before he could finish. “Let Seiya handle this, fumo.”

“M-Mii...”

The dragon opened his maw, revealing jaws wider than Seiya was tall. His fangs glittered in the light of the braziers’ flame. 《Cease your prattle! I’ll swallow you whole!》

“Yeah, yeah. Swallow me whole! What a dumb lizard... You roar and you growl and you eat small creatures whole, but I bet that’s all you can do.” Seiya laughed mockingly. The dragon’s eyes flashed with anger, flames spurting from his nostrils. Then a nasty smile formed on his lips, and he fixed his eyes on Seiya.

《Interesting. Then why don’t you prove how much you know?》

“Sounds great. Ask me anything.”

《Oh?》

“Riddles, laws of the universe, the Ukrainian word for ‘dumb lizard’... Any question at all, as long as it has an answer. But if I get it right, you need to let us go and release our friends. Is that acceptable?”

《Hmph... very well. But as penance for your pathetic boasting, if you can’t answer, your death will not be quick. I’ll take my time with your friends, too, dissecting them in five-minute increments!》

“Agreed. Bring it on, then. I’m in a hurry, so make it snappy.”

Seiya held his palm out and beckoned the dragon with his fingers; now was the time to use a grenade.

“Hey, Kanie-kun! This is a little reckless, mii!”

While the weeping Tiramii tried to stop him, Moffle watched, contemplative. The red dragon was grinning openly, now. He must have thought of a question that couldn’t possibly be answered—or maybe he was imagining how he’d deal with Seiya after he failed...

The dragon spoke grandly. 《Then, small one. This is my question to you, reaching deep into days of yore: During the early medieval period, Regnum Sonim’s Illimo I, known as the God of War—”

“The grail of Sage Thodemme Onshisho.”

Correct!

If this were a quiz show, there would be a happy chime sound and a shower of audience applause. But here, the group just stared at him.

《Er... Well... I haven’t finished asking the question yet...》

“I’m right, aren’t I? The grail of Sage Thodemme... uh, Onshisho. Don’t make me repeat myself.”

《Er... well...》

“It’s the right answer, isn’t it?!”

《I-It is... yes, it is.》 The dragon, intimidated, ducked his head.

“Moffu...”

“A-Amiizing! Kanie-kun, how did you know?!”

“Heh. Trade secret,” Seiya said brusquely. He had used the “magic” that Latifah had given him when she’d offered him the manager position—the power to read a person’s mind a single time. He wasn’t certain if it could be used on a monster like this, but he’d tried it on a neighborhood cat the other day, and he’d heard its mind saying(?) “meow, meow, mrrow,” so it had seemed logical that he could.

He had known that now wasn’t the time to be stingy with his grenades—though lately, he’d actually been using them frequently outside of the park to help with his negotiations...

《Y-You must have cheated!》 the dragon argued, after coming back to his senses. 《There’s no way that a mortal like you could know the answer to that question! It appears on the entrance exam for the livestock alchemy department at the Schubert University of Agriculture! It’s the most difficult exam in the magical world!》

“It’s an old entrance exam question?!”

“Lame!”

Seiya and Tiramii both stood there dumbfounded, while Moffle nodded in deep understanding.

“I see, fumo. SchuAgri is definitely a well-respected institution, and its exam study workbooks are highly prized, fumo. It’s enough that even Maple Land’s Kawai Juku have special courses for it.”

“You have that prep school chain in Maple Land, too?”

“Moffu,” Moffle said affirmatively. “Now, I wouldn’t say it constitutes ‘knowledge beyond mortal men.’ If you start with the fundamentals and put in the effort, you’ll get in easily enough. I’m thinking this little lizard’s brain isn’t so mighty after all!”

The red dragon, who had been grinding his fangs in frustration, now exploded at Moffle’s words. 《Sh-Shut up! Shut up, shut up! Even if it is an old question, you shouldn’t have been able to answer it! I don’t accept it! I won’t let you leave here after all!》 The red dragon let out another roar.

“Hey, no fair, mii!”

“Now he’s throwing a tantrum...”

“You’re a despicable dragon to go back on your word, fumo! Have a taste of my fist!” Moffle sprang up as the red dragon attacked. Slipping through the claws that smashed into the ground, he closed the distance between them in an instant, and slammed his fist hard into his wide open jaw.

“Moffu!” With an uppercut propelled by his entire body, Moffle was able to unleash force that was an easy match for a Shin Shoryuken dished out at max gauge.

Despite the immense gap in size, getting struck in a weak point still sent the dragon reeling back. 《Guwah?!》

After landing, Moffle swiftly crossed his arms and gathered chi into his body. “Well, I see you’re not so weak after all! But can you withstand this, fumo?!” Mysterious destructive energy began coalescing just below his navel.

Seiya had his doubts about why a theme park mascot could do that, but the authentic-looking aura wreathed Moffle nevertheless. So rather than object, he ordered: “Hey, cut it out.”

“Graaaaaaaaaaah!” Moffle roared, totally ignoring the order. “Take this, fumo! Secret Technique! Dragon-Slaying Destructi—”

“I told you to cut it out!” Moffle tumbled forward with a kick in the butt from Seiya. His mysterious aura vanished with a *poof*.

“What are you doing, fumo? I was going to use my focused spiritual power to create a micro black hole and fry him with Hawking radiation!”

“Liar!” Seiya scoffed. “You can’t fry people with Hawking radiation on a whim!”

“Moffu...”

“Anyway,” Seiya continued, “look at him.”

“Hmm?”

The red dragon was curled up in a corner of the room, cradling his injured jaw with his forefoot. 《Sorry. I’m really sorry. I shouldn’t have gotten so carried away...》

He was like a wannabe delinquent who lashed out half-heartedly, then gave up immediately when he got disciplined for it. It was enough that Seiya was starting to feel a little bad, as if he was the one who had tried to shake down the dragon. He looked around and saw that the minor enemies were showing no further signs of aggression; they were just watching them from afar. It looked as though Moffle’s violence had cowed them.

“Moffu... I suppose that first hit was enough, fumo.”

《...But it was a little much, don’t you think? I was swinging my claws intentionally to miss you... but you really hit me! I know I probably got a little too into the role, but you were my first guests in a while and...》 sulked the red dragon Rubrum.

“Wait a minute,” Seiya interrupted. “Did you say ‘guests’?”

《Yeah. You’re the second ever visitors to this attraction, Rubrum’s Proving Grounds.》

“Um... ahh... attraction?”

Just then, a stone pillar in the back of the chamber slid open, an employee door opened, and Sento Isuzu came into view.

“Sento?” Seiya blinked. “You’re okay?”

Macaron came out after Isuzu. They were followed by an

unfamiliar, weasel-like mascot.

“Kanie-kun,” Isuzu greeted him perfunctorily. “This may surprise you, but they’re telling the truth.”

Now that she mentioned it, he remembered seeing a document or a project sheet for something like this: twelve or thirteen years ago, there had been a plan proposed for the second park area—apart from the stadium—whose development had been stalled for lack of funding.

It would have simulated the world of a computer RPG, which were quite popular at the time, and let visitors experience a dungeon adventure. The project name was “Final Quest (temp).” It had been such a cheap-sounding name that Seiya couldn’t help but remember it.

That was all he knew about the project. That, and the fact that it should have been scrapped, and the land abandoned, when their financial issues proved intractable.

“If the project was scrapped, then what’s it doing here now?” Seiya asked the downcast Rubrum and his staff.

«Oh, well... The truth is, I’m just a hired hand, so I don’t know much about the place personally...»

“I’ll explain this, mog.” It turned out that the monsters were being played by a large swarm of mole-like fairies, the apparent leader of whom now stepped forward.

Though it was a bit late to matter, Seiya could see now that the weapons they had been carrying were well-sculpted urethane foam. The traps must have been made the same way; there had never been any danger of anyone getting hurt.

The three-heads-tall leader mole (for some reason, he was wearing a tie and a safety helmet) continued:

“I’m Taramo, son of Dorumo. I’m the chief of the Mogute clan, and president of the Mogmog Builders’ Union!”

“Um, which means...?”

“It means I’m in charge here, mog.”

“Good to hear it,” Seiya said agreeably. “So, Taramo, please enlighten me; what’s a scrapped attraction doing here?”

“I’ll need to start with the tragic history of our Mogute clan, mog. It all began 2,000 years ago—”

“Ah, no. Please keep it brief.” Seiya waved both hands and cut off Taramo mid-speech.

“Huh? But it’s a long and epic story on par with the history of Tolkien’s elves. You’re such a philistine, mog.”

“Just sum it up in three sentences,” Seiya ordered.

“...We’d long been on the run from tyrants who sought us for our amazing carpentry skills,” Taramo explained. “Thirteen years ago we got sick of it all, and asked the manager of the park to let us use this land. They needed it to be an attraction on paper, so we set this up,

and we've been living here ever since. There! Three sentences."

Everyone other than Seiya clapped, impressed that he had managed it.

"Hey, hold on a second!" Seiya objected. "Are you people satisfied with that explanation?"

"You're the one who wanted it summed up in three sentences, ron."

"I found his explanation very clear, fumo.

"Kanie-kun, are you secretly stupid, mii?"

Why does everyone treat me as stupid here? Seiya was just about to argue when Isuzu interrupted. She was holding a laptop in her hands, and seemed to have been using cloud data to check out the story.

"I just looked through our past expenditures... and it appears to be true," she concluded. "The manager at that time conspired with various other department heads to accommodate the Mogute Clan. There were even unexplained diversions of money..."

"In other words, the 'scrapped attraction' actually existed, and it's been using park funds?!" Seiya was scandalized. "Without bringing in any guests?!"

"...Is that the case, Taramo-san?"

Prodded by Isuzu, Taramo nodded. "Well, we accepted funds to build the attraction... But we haven't taken one cent from the park since then, mog. We do tap you for electricity and water... but that's just a very small amount, mog. We've been digging into our personal funds for all other living and operating expenses."

Macaron and Tiramii both went pale at that.

"Wait, ron! Digging into your own funds, you mean..."

Taramo nodded. "This chamber was once full of treasure... but it's almost all gone now, mog."

"You used it all up, mii?!"

They had been taking care of dozens of Mogute Clan members for over a decade, after all. It was easy to imagine that costing millions, perhaps even billions of yen. As expected, the legend of the treasure of the maze was a dead end.

"Of course, we've been running low lately, so for the past few years we've all been working part-time jobs. Convenience stores, family restaurants, late night road work..." It seemed like a rather dreary life.

"So you have been leaving here?" Seiya questioned him.

"Quite often. We have secret passages all over the park, mog."

"Hmm..."

Taramo gazed into the distance. "We'd like our presence to remain a secret, mog. So if you could just go and pretend you never saw us, we'd really appreciate it, mog."

“.....”

“The manager we met was so kind. We had been hired by the rulers of the Polytear Kingdom to dig secret escape tunnels from their palace. Then were buried alive to keep us quiet about it. Of course, we weren’t about to skulk around underground forever!”

“Isn’t that from the A-Team?” Seiya questioned.

“I can’t believe you recognized it! ...So, of course, we dug tunnels to escape. But anywhere we went, they pursued. We were at the end of our rope when your manager threw us a lifeline, mog. We were even given this land to hide on, mog!” Large tears began to spill from Taramo’s button eyes. Seiya looked and saw that the rest of the Mogute Clan was welling up out of remembered gratitude for “the manager.”

“Please, Mr. Acting Manager! Please leave us be, mog!”

“Poor things, mii. Let’s do it, mii!”

《I beg you too. Please, please!》

All eyes fell on Seiya. They were waiting for those five little words: “Fine, I’ll leave you be.”

“Hey, Sento. Is this ‘manager’ they’re talking about...”

“...Yes. It is.”

He then looked at Moffle. Moffle nodded seriously.

“I see...” Seiya had more or less gotten a grasp on what had happened. In light of that, he’d have a lot to think about. He ran some calculations in his head, as quickly and impartially as he could. And the answer he came up with was—

“No.”

The room broke out in a chorus of cries of disbelief.

“Why, mii?!”

“That’s cruel, mog!”

“Tell us why, ron!”

Backing away from the group as they interrogated him, Seiya repeated himself. “The answer is no! No, get it?! And as for why—” Seiya checked the time. He couldn’t stay any longer. He had to get back to the administration building. “Look, I’ll explain later! Just take me to the exit for now!”

The red dragon Rubrum moved to block their path. 《I w-won’t let you! I won’t let you leave until you ensure that we—》

“Moffle!”

“Moffu!” Moffle stepped forward. His glare caused Rubrum to back off, cowed.

《Y-You don’t have to glare at me... I just wanted you to realize how desperate I was. I wasn’t really going to stop you. So please, please, don’t hit me!》

“Just get ready to move out, okay?! Moffle, you stand guard here,

got it?!”

“Hmm. Not sure how I feel about being treated as an errand boy, but... fine, fumo.” Moffle nodded reluctantly, perhaps realizing that Seiya must have a good reason for all this.

“Okay, let’s go! Darn it... it’s going to be a disaster if we’re late...”

With Isuzu following, Seiya ran out of the room.



Really... why would you give something so stressful to the head of the PR department? Tricen, sitting in the conference room before a line of men in suits, let out a long sigh. He was wearing his Lalapatch Charm, so he looked like an ordinary mortal to them, but that wasn’t the reason he was so tense.

From left to right sat: a section chief and branch manager from a real estate company, a branch manager of a major bank, the new representative and company director of Amagi Development, and a clerk from a third party agency. It was a set that would make him nervous at the best of times, but on top of that, they were joined by a line of executives and managers from Malmart Stores.

Malmart Stores! That great American superstore! Worldwide sales over thirty trillion yen! The meeting was a contract negotiation with Malmart’s Japanese branch.

Tricen had known that Kanie Seiya, Sento Isuzu, Ashe and a few others had been holding secret meetings and sending emails about something or other, but he hadn’t known exactly what it was. Now that he knew—well, he didn’t know what kind of magic they had used to get this far, but the scale of it was simply too enormous. *A worldwide superstore chain coming to our backwater amusement park?* he thought in amazement. *What have these young people accomplished?!*

Tricen thought back to earlier in the day: “Unbelievable. Outrageous! I can’t lead negotiations with those big-shots! I’m a Japanese lit major; I can’t speak English! I, Tricen, am compelled to hunch over from severe stomach pain!” That had been Tricen’s argument that morning when Seiya instructed him to attend the meeting.

“A high schooler like me can’t lead negotiations,” Seiya had insisted. “So we have to present you as a vice president. Just be frivolous and inoffensive, and Sento and I will work things out as your secretaries.”

When he’d put it that way, Tricen could hardly have refused.

The meeting had been due to start at 4:00 PM, but it was already ten minutes past. They’d led off with a business card exchange marathon (which had been surprisingly nerve-racking by itself, and had taken most of Tricen’s mental energy), and now he was making

small talk about tomorrow's weather, his teeth gritted in a smile.

The guests looked uniformly unhappy. Some seemed confused as to why they were even there.

"...So, erm. I believe that a low pressure system will bring rain to eastern Japan tomorrow. It'll be cloudy skies in the morning, with an 80% chance of precipitation in the afternoon. If you're going out, don't forget your umbrellas. ...Now, regarding the temperature. Though today was mild, it will drop about eight degrees on average tomorrow, so dress like you would for mid-March—"

"We've heard enough about the weather, Toride-san," the president of Amagi Development said ("Toride" was Tricen's Japanese name), cutting off Tricen's vapid spiel.

The president of Amagi Development was a man on the brink of 70, with sunken bulldog eyes and long, shaggy eyebrows. He had been an MLIT bureaucrat before taking his present position.

Amagi Development had long been a hostile force towards their park, and the president was among those who wanted to turn it into a golf course. He wasn't being particularly aggressive about it at the moment, though; he seemed to think that if he left Amagi Brilliant Park to its own devices, he could simply crush it next year. In the meantime, he was satisfied enough collecting his eight-figure "executive compensation" for coming into the office a few times a week, sipping tea and playing computer mahjong—In other words, he was your typical ex-government bureaucrat in corporate leadership.

The old bulldog continued in annoyance: "We've given you this precious time out of our days, and all you've done is talk about the weather. It's time we got to the matter at hand."

"Ah, yes, you're quite right to point that out. But I don't have all the documentation on hand, so... er, the acting manager... that is, my secretary should be bringing it by soon..."

Kanie Seiya, the person most crucial to the negotiations, hadn't shown up yet. Tricen had called him several times since before the meeting started, but the calls hadn't gotten through. He couldn't contact Sento Isuzu either, though he had seen them working away in the office that morning... Where could they have gone off to?

He cast a pleading glance at Ashe, who was sitting at the table with him, but all she did was shrug. "We can prepare the documentation later. This is a major proposal, so we should probably move on from small talk."

"Y-Yes, of course! W-Well then... let me explain what makes our park special. I'd like to give you all an in-depth pitch—"

"We don't need to hear that," the President of Amagi Development said flatly. "We know it's not special."

"Oh, don't say that!" Tricen protested. "It's a very good park!"

“Toride-san... are you toying with us?”

“C-Certainly not, ah, er...”

The executives’ expressions had passed from annoyance into total coldness. Tricen’s own face had gone stark white. Pushed to desperation, he was just about to start talking about his favorite idols, when the door of the conference room opened with a bang.

“Sorry we’re late!”

Kanie Seiya and Sento Isuzu entered. They were both wearing suits, shoulders heaving, and carrying documents and tablets at their sides.



“I’m sorry we’re late, Vice President Toride. We have the documents you requested. Please confirm the contents.” They sat on either side of Tricen and pressed the files into his hands.

“Ah, yes. Goodness, what trouble. You kept everyone waiting, you know? Now, let’s see... yes, yes...” He reclined self-righteously and opened the file Seiya had given him: there was nothing inside but some supermarket flyers.

What am I supposed to do with this?! he was about to cry, but Seiya clamped a hand over Tricen’s mouth, then smiled congenially to the various representatives present.

“Everyone, I’m quite sorry to have kept you all waiting. If you will allow it, I would like to go over a few details on Vice President Toride’s behalf. Is that acceptable?”

The rest of the watching group nodded, seemingly ready to hear him out.

The strangest aspect, to Tricen, was that nobody in the room seemed to be meeting Seiya for the first time. He and Isuzu hadn’t even had to introduce themselves. *What’s going on here?* he wondered. *Can you handle this, Kanie-san?!*

“I appreciate it. Then... let us commence final negotiations for the sale of the second park lot of Amagi Brilliant Park.”

Tricen almost cried out in shock, but this time it was Isuzu who silenced him.

Seiya had called them negotiations, but since nearly everything had been worked out over the course of the last few weeks, this was really just a final meeting to confirm the contents of the contract.

Amagi Development had been putting up resistance, but Malmart Stores was enthusiastic about the proposal. They were the largest supermarket chain in North America, but their latest attempt to enter the Japanese market had ended in painful failure. Thanks to a new trade agreement about to be signed, though, they were planning to give a Japanese expansion another try.

This time, their plan was to open up large shopping malls that would be filled with various brand stores. But to do that, they’d need a lot of land.

“I see...” thought Isuzu, “but how do you know about their plan?” Three weeks before, when Seiya had told her about his plan to sell the land, Isuzu had asked the natural question. He may be their acting manager, but Seiya was still in high school, and had no real connections in the financial world.

“I wasn’t after Malmart at first,” Seiya had explained to her. “I just wanted to find someone, anyone, willing to buy the second park’s

land. If worst came to worst, I'd let Amagi Development make it into a golf course like they wanted—but I was hoping to find a better deal, preferably a facility that would bring in big crowds. So I started reaching out.”

He went on to explain the touch-and-go nature of the process: he'd started with a major discount goods chain, heading right to their headquarters in the city and speaking to a secretary. Then, he'd worked his way up the ladder to the subsection chief, section chief, department head, and company director, feeling out whether or not they would be willing to buy the land.

“Did you use that magic of yours?” Isuzu had wanted to know.

“Of course I did,” Seiya had replied. “There was no way I could get that far with negotiations alone. First, I saw who the secretary was cheating with, and used that to get an in with a subsection chief. Then I used the same method on him to get an in with the section chief. Then I found out about the section chief's insider trading hobby to move up to the department head. The department head frequented S&M clubs, and let me tell you, *that* was a hard read to get...”

“Understood. You worked your way up via blackmail, then.” Isuzu was taken aback by Seiya's initiative and brazenness. It occurred to her how right she'd been to make him use his mind-reading magic on her the day after he'd gotten it. If she hadn't, she wouldn't be able to work with him for constant worrying.

“Blackmail is an ugly word,” he'd protested. “I just got a little dirt on them and asked for their assistance.”

“Most would call that blackmail,” she'd pointed out.

“...Okay, fine. At any rate, what I learned is that blackmailing a few individuals isn't enough to sway the direction of a huge conglomerate. The first home goods store I went to just had no interest in opening new stores, so I gave up on them.” Still, for some reason, the president had decided he liked Seiya, and had taken him for ginger pork at a local restaurant.

“I'm glad he was so understanding...” Isuzu had commented.

“Yeah. He said, ‘come work for us once you're out of college.’ After that, I tried the same trick on company after company. There were more than a few cases where I used my magic at the wrong time, or I wasn't able to exploit what I learned to move up to the next rung on the ladder... I felt a little like a struggling student on a job hunt,” he'd admitted.

“What happened then?” Isuzu had prompted him.

“I walked all around before ending up at a major domestic shopping mall company. You know the one. A branch in every region —”

“Ah, yes. I'm aware of it.”

“They’d been struggling lately, and had no intention of opening new branches,” Seiya had sighed. “They were in the middle of plans to downsize, actually...”

But then, halfway through the discussion, Seiya had realized that the man he was talking to thought he was a spy from a rival company.

“And the rival company was Malmart’s Japanese affiliate?” Isuzu had questioned.

“Yeah. There were rumors flying on the management level that Malmart was trying to expand into the Japanese market again. It was a great tip, so I went right from there to Malmart’s Shinjuku HQ.”

He then explained how he’d worked things out from there; Malmart had been looking for good locations in the Tokyo suburbs. They had quite a few candidates, but they all had their issues: too expensive, too isolated, too far from the city, too much pushback from the local merchants...

“Meanwhile, although AmaBri is a crummy amusement park, it’s got a good location,” Seiya had explained. “It’s less than an hour by train or bus to Shinjuku, and a mere ten-minute drive from the highway. There are undeveloped hills all around, no residential or shopping districts nearby... Actually, it’s an ideal location for a large shopping mall.”

And so, he had presented himself to someone who would talk to him and offered a reasonable price for the land. Of course, that didn’t mean everything had gone smoothly from there: there were doubts that it was too good to be true, and Seiya was at a disadvantage during price negotiations. He could only use his mind-reading power once per person, so he had to time its use carefully.

“At any rate,” he’d concluded, “the negotiations are coming together. Now we just have to get Amagi Development on board.”

As a large stockholder in the park, Amagi Development had a lot of say in what they did. They also wanted the park to close. Would they really give their permission to sell the second park?

When Isuzu pointed that problem out, Seiya had just shrugged.

“They’ll accept it,” he’d said simply. “They’ll make money if the sale goes through, too. I believe Amagi Development is in difficult financial straits, just like us.”

“If that Kurisu Takaya person is still with them,” Isuzu predicted, “he’ll never allow it.”

The perpetual thorn in their side—Kurisu Takaya, of Amagi Development—had disappeared abruptly since revealing his ‘true identity’ to them the other day. They didn’t know why he’d gone, but without him, Amagi Development had no particularly shrewd negotiators; they couldn’t move aggressively to crush them.

At any rate, he’d gotten the sales plan on track. With Isuzu’s help

getting all the details ironed out, it would probably become a reality.

“But... are you certain that you want to do this?” Isuzu asked Seiya after they worked out the details in his office that night. “It may not be in use, but the second park is a part of AmaBri, and the land we’re selling includes the stadium that saved us last month. Don’t you...” Isuzu had trailed off hesitantly.

“Does it bother you?” he’d wanted to know. “Once final negotiations are done, but before it goes into effect, I’ll explain it to the cast. If they don’t accept it... too bad, I guess.”

She could find little to object to in Seiya’s words. To the contrary, it was a wonderful accomplishment that spoke well of his skills. At the same time, the land the second park was on was as large as the area of the current one. Selling it was like giving up half of the park itself.

“There are probably a lot of cast members thinking, subconsciously, ‘Once business gets back on track, maybe we can expand our attractions into the second park to make the best theme park in Japan,’” she’d finally said. “Won’t this be stealing that hope away from them?”

Moffle, in particular, was likely to get enraged. He’d shout: “How dare you! You’ll pay, fumo!” and lunge at Seiya before he had a chance to explain. That was likely why Seiya hadn’t told him about the sale.

“Expanding into the second park? Sorry to burst your bubble, but that was never going to happen,” Seiya had whispered resolutely. “It’s more likely that the park would shut down first. I’m sorry to repeat myself, but a drowning man can’t be picky about where he comes ashore.”

“True, but...”

“We’re never going to reach a point where our biggest problem is an inability to expand,” Seiya had insisted. “I promise you that.”

“I... suppose not,” Isuzu had reluctantly agreed with him.

“Besides, if the park manages to last into next year and the next, that’s when the sale will really pay off. Think about it,” he’d told her. “We’re going to have a huge shopping mall opening next door, right?”

He was talking about synergy. It was a powerful thing—families who shopped at the mall would also stop by the park, and guests cooling down after a day in the park would visit the shopping mall. Not a bad deal for Malmart, at all.

“Once that happens—I should say, if we manage to live that long—it will greatly prolong the life of the park. You could rest easy for a while even after I’m gone,” Seiya had explained. “So no regrets, okay?”



The final negotiations had been completed, and the official contract would be signed at the start of next week.

Tricen and Ashe had acted surprised by the breezy way Seiya dealt with the stone-faced bigwigs, but it was easily explained. During his child actor days, he'd done countless auditions for eccentric directors and producers. If he messed up, his mother would scold him and smack him. Compared to the anxiety he'd felt back then, conferences like these were nothing.

The one wild card in all this—Amagi Development—had approved the talks, as well... But, getting their approval meant that the park now faced a new challenge: a spike in their required yearly attendance. It was a hard condition to swallow, but he had no choice but to take it.

That night, as closing time neared, Seiya headed for the rooftop garden of the towering Maple Castle at the center of the park. It was late April, close to Golden Week. A calm wind blew through the garden, stirring the flowers in full bloom.

"I have been awaiting your arrival, Kanie-sama." Latifah Fleuranza was waiting for him, with the usual tea set on the usual garden table.

"Ah... right," he stammered.

"Surely you have had a long day," she said. "I was able to procure some very fine tea leaves today... I hope that they might help."

"Mm... well, thanks, I guess."

Latifah had lost her memory of everything before this month, and things had been awkward between them since then. While she treated him neither rudely nor coldly, she was definitely not the Latifah he knew: she didn't know about his promise to her, or about his acrophobia. She probably didn't know the full story about why he'd taken on the stressful duties of acting manager, either.

"You smell of earth today," Latifah said, her small nose twitching. "Have you been working in the soil? The sun was very bright; I hope that you did not suffer heatstroke."

"Ah... it was something like that, I guess. And we did have a few close shaves." He said it rather jokingly, and she giggled. Then, she moved her face close to his chest. "Wh-What?" he asked.

"You smell like Isuzu-san," Latifah observed. "Like her favorite shampoo..."

"Huh? Why would I... what?" Then, he remembered: After all the chaos in the maze, they had run back to the administration building, changed into their suits, and then met in the elevator up to the meeting room. At that time, Isuzu had pointed out that his necktie was crooked, and when she had leaned in to fix it, her bangs had tickled

his cheek. It had flustered him a bit at the time.

"Oh, I remember..." he stuttered. "It was, uh... She was just helping me... I mean, there was a little contact between us, but it's nothing serious..."

Latifah giggled again. "I was merely teasing. She is your secretary; it is natural that you would smell like her."

"...Y-Yeah." Feeling a little smothered, Seiya loosened his tie.

Her sense of smell was seriously impressive if she could pick up on a brief moment of contact from hours ago. He'd have to be conscious of his scent from now on.

"But I admit... I do envy the way that she is with you constantly," Latifah commented.

"R-Really?"

"Yes. Very much so." This time, it was hard to tell if she was serious or joking.

Seiya wondered how he should react to her comment. As a nicety, as teasing, as serious...? *I have no idea*, he realized. Just minutes ago, he'd been conducting negotiations with adults with perfect confidence. Why did dealing with this girl always completely demolish his poise?

Just as he started to worry that she might hear his heart pounding, Latifah moved away in a perfectly natural manner. "Were the negotiations fruitful?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"You had a crucial negotiation regarding the second park today, did you not?" Latifah had already given permission for the sale of the second park. She had been a bit wistful about it, naturally, but in the end, her cast members' livelihood was more important to her than any land. After having the situation explained to her, she just couldn't say 'no.'

"Oh, that?" Seiya remembered. "I think we got the deal together."

"I am so glad to hear it."

"But... they're raising our yearly attendance quota," he admitted. "That means our feet are to the fire more than ever before."

"But money will not be a concern, at least?" Latifah asked.

"Not for a while, no," he answered her. "And... well, before the negotiation, I checked out the second park."

"Yes?"

"And... well. I excavated something there, you could say... It's put me in kind of a sticky situation..."

"...?"

He was talking about the Mogute Clan and the underground labyrinth. Over ten years ago, when they'd been run out of some country or other, the manager who had saved them and given them

the land in secret was, obviously, Latifah. Thanks to her curse, though, she had lost all memory of the situation, which put him at a loss as to exactly how he should explain things to her.

“What is it?” she asked. “Is it something that would pain me to hear?”

“Hmm... well, kind of. Let’s just say, Latifah... Say you were a landlord for a big apartment complex somewhere.”

“Ahh?”

“And you let some refugees stay in that apartment. And then, for some unavoidable reason, you had to kick them out... Uh, let’s say the apartment is aging and has to be torn down, or something. And, um...”

“Ah,” Latifah confessed, “I fear I do not follow...”

Ugh, it was so annoying. “Look, I’ll just tell it to you straight. What’s going on is—” Seiya decided to ditch the analogies and just tell her.

Latifah heard him out to the end, politely prompting and nodding at all the right points. “You mean, it was I who offered protection to this Mogute Clan?”

“Yeah,” he admitted.

“And today, you made the decision to drive them out. Is that what you are saying?”

“Yeah.” He’d used the term ‘refugees’ in his analogy, but that wasn’t far from the truth. He didn’t know the exact political situation in that magical realm of theirs, but the fact was that they had been run out of their homeland and they were in trouble. And now, he had to destroy their new home and sell it off.

But Latifah’s reaction was far from recriminating. “I am sorry...” she whispered, looking downcast. Her wavy blonde hair hung over her face, obscuring her expression. “It was my irresponsible actions that forced you to make this painful decision...”

“N-No...,” Seiya protested. “It wasn’t especially painful. And the person you are now hasn’t done anything wrong.”

“I cannot agree... Even if I have no memory of it, it was I who made the decision. I do not know this Mogute Clan, yet I was surely moved to pity, and kicked the issue down the road with no thought to the future. It was not the right thing to do. How can I ever make it up to you?” Though her voice was resolute, she couldn’t hide the fact that she was shaken.

Seiya said nothing in response. Unable to bear that silence, perhaps, Latifah began to whisper again in fits and starts: “...I am certain that... this happens every year, and yet I... I feel as though I do not even know who I am. ...I attempt to act in ways appropriate to my royal station, yet I am haunted by shadows of... a weaker, more foolish self. I cannot help but wonder what unforgivable errors I have

made in the past... Perhaps I even treated you terribly last year..."

"You didn't," he reassured her. "Really, you didn't. You were fine."

"Your kindness is most appreciated. But I cannot... expel the thought from my mind. It frightens me," Latifah admitted.

To live in constant fear of things you didn't remember doing... Seiya couldn't even imagine what it would be like. Maybe a heavy drinker like Moffle would understand a bit better, but binge drinking could make you forget one night at best. The thought of forgetting a whole year was horrifying.

"So when I hear about things like this... about the Mogute Clan... I grow so angry with my past self. 'That was not me. Surely, the person I am now would have handled things with greater skill and dignity.' Of course, I know that that cannot be true... and yet I wish so much to believe it... and then I feel ashamed, and angry. I cannot forgive myself."

Seiya didn't know what to say to her. She'd always acted so bravely, with her kind smile so ever-present, that he'd assumed that nothing fazed her. He'd never realized that she felt so conflicted, deep down. All this time, should he have been thinking of the girl he met three months ago and the girl before him now as different people? He didn't know what to say. All he knew was that she was suffering.

They remained sitting where they were, silently, until the steam stopped billowing from the freshly-poured tea.

"I... I know that I must take responsibility, even so," she confessed. "But I do not even know how I might begin to do so..."

"Ah, hey, come on..." Seiya said, forcing cheer in his address to the disheartened Latifah. "D-Don't worry about it. I'll work something out. The employee cafeteria, the warehouse... I can at least find them a place to crash for the night."

"But they are being hunted, are they not?" Latifah questioned. "We cannot give them asylum."

"Well... umm..." He didn't know the political relationships among the magical realms, but they were probably complicated. What would happen if the rulers who tried to bury the Mogute Clan learned that they were here, and demanded their return? What if some kind of magical gate opened, sending a hostile army to invade the park? Seiya had no frame of reference for such things; he could barely even conceive of it.

"No need to worry about that, fumo." They turned. Moffle was standing beneath the terrace. Seiya had last left him to stand watch over the Mogute Clan, so he must have abandoned that post without leave.

"H-How long have you been standing there?" he demanded to

know.

“Since the awkward silence. You act like somebody died or something, fumo.”

“Wh-Whatever. Weren’t you supposed to be standing watch?”

“I got bored sitting around in that cave, so I brought them with me, fumo. ...Hey, everyone, come on in!”

Just then, the members of the Mogute Clan swarmed in through the entrance to the rooftop garden. They looked around in wonderment, poked at the flowers, and checked the condition of the flagstones.

“Mog, mog... what a tasteful garden, mog.”

“Hmm, whoever laid the tiles wasn’t exactly a master mason, mog...”

“The mortar in the walls is well laid, though, mog.”

Seiya exploded. “Did you bring them all here?! The cast isn’t even supposed to know about them, remember?”

“Well, cat’s out of the bag now, fumo.”

“Damn you!” Seiya cursed. “We were sitting here, racking our brains over what to do with them, and you—and what’s that loud flapping so—*gwah?!?*”

The source of the flapping that Seiya had heard was immediately spotted. The red dragon Rubrum, flying through the night sky, now slowly touched down in the garden.

《Sorry, I couldn’t fit through the employee entrance. No big deal, right?》

“The hell it isn’t! Did you fly over the highway like that? Tons of people must have seen you!”

《Aw... I’ve just been shut away for so long, I thought it would be nice to fly again. You could at least show me some appreciation...》

“Shut up!” Seiya fumed.

“Now, now... Kanie-sama,” Latifah said soothingly. “Uncle—rather, Moffle-san is correct. The fact is that they are here now, and that cannot be undone.”

“Hrmm... I guess you’re right...”

Just then, the Mogute Clan realized that Latifah was there. Their little button eyes opened wide and they waved their hands in the air.

“Manager!”

“Oh! Miss Manager! How we’ve missed you, mog!”

“You’re as beautiful as ever, mog!”

The Mogute clan fell to their knees, grateful tears streaming down their cheeks as they expressed their deep and wholehearted respect for Latifah. She didn’t seem to know how to react. Although she was blind, it was probably clear from the sounds what the situation was. But as far as this year’s Latifah was concerned, this was her first

meeting with the Mogute Clan. “Ah... I fear... you have me at a loss.”

“Just ignore them,” Seiya advised her. “Let them do what they want. ...Hmm?”

Standing at the rear of the Mogute Clan group was Isuzu, holding a flag that read “end of the line.” Strange—he was sure that she had stayed behind in the administration building after the conference to tidy up some paperwork.

“Sento. Why did you let them through? I told you to leave them in that cave!”

“Sir, I believe Moffle has something to say regarding that,” Isuzu said, still holding the flag.

“Fine... I’ll hear you out,” Seiya said from between clenched teeth. “Talk!”

Moffle, who had been waiting with a neutral expression, now cleared his throat: “After you left, I had a talk with the clan leader, Taramo. It was the Polytear Kingdom that tried to bury them alive, fumo.”

“We already knew that,” Seiya said.

They had hired them to dig the palace’s secret escape tunnels, then buried them alive to shut them up. It was a common story in human history, too.

“Ah, but here’s the crucial part, fumo. The Polytear *Kingdom*—More properly known, now, as the Polytear *Republic*.”

“...?”

“Oh. Do you mean...” Latifah put a small fingertip to her lips, seeming to realize something. Seiya was still completely in the dark.

“That’s right, fumo. Around four years ago, there was a revolution in Polytear. The wicked royals got exiled and a peaceful animal democracy formed, fumo.”

“What?” Seiya asked incredulously.

“You see, Facebook got popular over there, and that allowed the people to organize a revolution,” Moffle explained. “There were riots, the government and army fell apart... and then, the palace fell. It’s a revolution museum now, fumo.”

“Wait,” said Seiya, trying to catch up. “Does that mean that the people who were after the Mogute Clan are gone now?”

“I’d say it stands to reason, fumo. What do you think, Taramo?”

“I agree, mog. We fought with some of the other realms... but if Polytear holds us no ill will, then we’re probably safe, mog.”

“What?” This was quite an unexpected windfall.

“We’d been hiding out underground so long, we had no idea, mog. Four years wasted... I don’t know whether to be disappointed or relieved, mog...”

“It seems that only Dornell ever connected to the mortal Internet,

which is why nobody ever caught on, fumo. Well, I suppose stranger things have happened..." Moffle folded his arms and nodded firmly.

All that worry for nothing. Seiya felt strange, like a rug had been swept out from under him.

"Thank goodness," Latifah said, her tone deeply relieved. "I am... so very glad. Does that mean that you can all be free?"

"Well, I suppose we can..." Taramo said.

Now, how to deal with them? Seiya wondered. One option would just be to say, "You've been through a lot, so now you can do whatever you like." But before he'd left that maze, Seiya had had an idea. The construction of that maze had been truly excellent. And if what they'd said was true, they'd completed it in a very short time. If only—

"Manager!" Taramo cried, thrusting his hands out towards Latifah. "We have been in your debt for all these years, mog! Please, allow us to use our attraction for the sake of the park, mog!"

The red dragon Rubrum joined in. 《Um, could you hire me, too? I'll do everything I can to scare the visitors...》

Ah, thank goodness. They were already hoping to stay in the park, so he didn't have to propose the idea himself. That would make salary negotiations easier. He had been hoping to employ them as cheaply as possible—preferably at his own rate of 850 yen per hour. Maybe he could even get them to accept 600 yen an hour during their trial period...

"Ah, Kanie-sama? What do you say?"

"Right. Actually..." Seiya rubbed the back of his head as he took a step forward. "We can't."

"Wh-Why not, mog?!"

"Because the second park is being sold."

The garden launched into an uproar. Moffle, enraged, shouted "How dare you! You'll pay, fumo!" and lunged at him.

Isuzu stopped the fight with Moffle and Latifah rebuked him. Once things had calmed down, Seiya was finally able to explain.

It was an entirely reasonable story, so everyone, including Moffle, accepted it quickly.

The Mogute Clan would stay in the employee cafeteria and warehouses while building a more permanent home elsewhere on the grounds. The large red dragon, Rubrum, would stay in the cast parking lot for now, under strict orders that he ensure no outsiders see him, no matter what.

Dornell ended up rejoining the cast after his ten years away. Since Tiramii was the current Fairy of Flowers, he'd be an onstage greeter for the time being—though, a part of him seemed to regret leaving his

shut-in lifestyle behind.

Moffle didn't seem completely satisfied about the sale of the second park, but since Latifah had given her permission on the matter, he ended up leaving (albeit not happily).

"Manager, Manager!" Just before he left the garden, the Chief of the Mogute Clan, Taramo, produced an old envelope and offered it to Latifah. "Here. You gave this to us before we went underground."

"...? Ah, yes... Th-Thank you."

"I gave it back to you, as promised. I hope we can keep working with you!" Then the Mogute Clan filed out and the garden was quiet again, at last.

"Sheesh... 50 new employees, just like that." Seiya, who had remained in the garden, let out a sigh. He was working with Isuzu to right the benches and chairs knocked over in the scuffle, and trying to settle the anxieties churning in his gut.

It was only then that he realized that Latifah was standing there, blankly, with the envelope in her hands.

"Should I read that for you?" he inquired.

"Wh-What?" Latifah stammered.

"It's a letter, right? If you don't mind me doing it...", he trailed off. "Or would you prefer Sento?"

"Ah... well..." After a moment's hesitation, Latifah seemed to steel herself, and proffered the letter to him. "Not at all. Kanie-sama, I insist that you read it."

The envelope was slightly yellowed with age and sealed with red wax. Seiya carefully broke the seal and produced the letter from within.

"Okay, then. ...Let's see." He passed his eyes over the words, then shook his head. "...I can't read it. What language is this?" "Ah, I beg your pardon... it must be in Maplese," Latifah said. "Isuzu-san, would you?"

"Yes, Your Highness." She must have been anticipating this, as she promptly snatched the letter away and began poring through it.

"If you would, though, Kanie-sama... I hope that you will stay and hear it."

"Are you sure?" he asked doubtfully.

"Yes," Latifah affirmed. "I am asking you, as acting manager, to stay. I do not know what that letter might contain... but I do not wish to hide anything from you."

"Okay."

"May I, then? I shall now commence." Isuzu read the entire letter, translating on the fly:

Hello. If you are reading this letter, it means that the curse has not yet

been lifted. Or perhaps, by some miracle, the curse has been lifted, yet I am still serving as manager of this park. (I hope that this is the case, but I realize that it is unlikely. Therefore, I am writing this under the assumption that the curse is still in place.)

I am sorry for the trouble I have caused you with my decision to house the Mogute Clan. I simply could not abandon people who had nowhere else to go. I have asked the secondary manager to hide them in the second park. Because he would surely be against this decision, due to my station, I am keeping this from Uncle.

The Mogute Clan, including their chief, Taramo-san, are very peaceful and kind. Please, be kind to them.

As I write this, it is March. I have enjoyed myself greatly this year. One year ago, I was so uncertain as to how to conduct myself in front of the others. It was very hard on me. Now, though, things are different. I love everybody in this park.

The person I am now will soon have to say goodbye to them all. But I will not be discouraged. I wish to try over and over again, and continue to love them all the same.

To you who are receiving this letter, do you love everyone? Do you love this world? It feels strange to say it, but I hope that you will continue to live your life to its fullest.

You need not worry. Because... you are me.

Isuzu finished reading the letter, leaving the rustling of greenery the only sound left in the garden.

“Ah... are you okay?” Seiya asked.

In a voice that was almost too low to hear, Latifah answered: “...It’s not fair.”

“.....” Seiya waited for her to elaborate.

“She is me, yet she is so much stronger than I am. I...” She turned away from Seiya and Isuzu to sag against the terrace railing, trembling. “Will I... ever be this way? Linger as I do, here in this terrifying darkness—will I ever be able to encourage myself, as she did?”



Isuzu didn't seem to know what to say. She just watched Latifah from behind, with sorrow in her eyes.

"Hey, Latifah..." Seiya took a step forward. "Which do you prefer. Harsh words or kind words?"

"Ah... harsh words... no, kind words, if you please. I am sorry. I cannot handle... harsh words... right now."

"I'll try to say it kindly, then," he told her. "You will. Of course you will."

She tilted her head in confusion at his brief statement. "Is that all?"

"Yes," he said shortly.

"...What would the harsh words have been, may I ask?" Latifah asked, curious.

"Of course you will. Quit worrying about the obvious, dummy."

"Is that all?"

"That's all."

She stood there quietly for a few more seconds, then giggled. "You are a terribly funny person, Kanie-sama."

"Am I?"

"But you must never speak to your girlfriend that way," she teased. "It lacks sensitivity."

"Hmm... well, sorry." He didn't have a girlfriend, of course. Or—wait, was she trying to imply something else with that phrasing?

Isuzu stared at them, her gaze silent and unreadable. Unsure of how to react, exactly, Seiya just responded with a shrug.

"I feel a little bit better. Kanie-sama, thank you very much." Latifah said, after a little stretch.

There did seem to be a bit more cheer in her voice than before.

April Activity Report 1 (Moffle)

Moffle had said he was doing some attraction renovations, so Seiya swung by to see how the work was coming along.

The attraction was, naturally, Moffle's House of Sweets. It was a game where you fired water pistol-shaped laser pointers at naughty mice, competing for points. Guests who got a good score would earn prizes or a picture with Moffle.

It was one of the more popular of the park's many mediocre attractions.

"...Anyway, this House of Sweets was built over ten years ago," Moffle said to Seiya as the two met up. He was wearing work clothes and a safety helmet, a well-stocked toolbelt hanging around his waist.

Behind him, Wrenchy-kun and some of the other backstage staff were hard at work, pushing the remodel forward. Adachi Eiko-san, whom they had ended up hiring, was also present, running here and there to help out. Seiya still didn't know her stage name; Isuzu seemed to know something, but whatever it was, she was keeping it to herself.

"It's the concept that needs modernizing, fumo. Ah, you know what I mean. This whole 'beat up the naughty rats!' concept aimed at good boys and girls... it doesn't appeal to the new generation, fumo."

"Hmm..." said Seiya. "All right, so what's the revamp? I should warn you, we're still on a budget..."

Selling the second park had secured them a bare minimum of funding, but they still weren't completely out of the water. He couldn't approve a total renovation of an attraction that easily.

"Ah, I know, fumo. I'm not changing the underlying structure. People have always liked the gaming elements of the House of Sweets, so I'm just making some minor changes to enhance that, fumo."

"Oh?"

"First, I'm replacing those water pistols the guests use, fumo. Here's the new prototype." Moffle handed him the new laser pointer.

Instead of a cheap water gun, it felt like an actual pistol; it was heavy and blocky, with a shiny black metal finish. The well detailed slide portion was inscribed with the words, "SIG SAUER."

"What is this?" Seiya asked.

"A P226. Used as many metal parts as I could get, fumo. It's got an electrically operated slide that moves back and forth, and if you look into the ejection port, you can really see the feed ramp! The battery's in the magazine—press down on the snap to remove it—and the decocker's the on-off switch. It's all there to enhance the mood, fumo."

Seiya's eyes had glazed over during the long string of jargon.

"If the guests rack up enough points, they can earn even more powerful weapons. Shotguns, sub-machine guns, assault rifles... For 10,000 points, you can even use a Gatling gun, fumo!"

Moffle proudly lined up his prototype weapons, and each let out a substantial *thunk* as he set it down. They all seemed sturdy and intimidating.

Seiya noted a variety of long, narrow items and a device about the size of a rugby ball. "What are these?" he asked.

"Anti-tank missiles, fumo. And this one's a sniper rifle. It can take out enemies even a kilometer away, fumo."

"And this?"

"A neutron bomb," Moffle answered him. "For suicide runs."

What exactly is he putting the guests up against? Seiya wondered. "...These don't look like they're for punishing naughty mice."

“Well, of course not! I modified the enemies too, fumo.”

Moffle led Seiya further into the House of Sweets, into the kitchen room where the mice would appear. The last time Seiya had come, it had been a whimsical world of pots, pans, and fruit baskets, from which mischievous but adorable mice would poke out their heads and squeak teasingly.

Now, it was in ruins.

The appliances were wrecked and blackened with char. All around them lay the bodies of dead soldiers, their dried blood staining the floor. A gloomy, unsettling BGM played from all around, mixed in with the distant sounds of gunshots and explosions. Now and then, a man’s dying scream rang out.

“This is where the mice come out, fumo.” A naughty mouse animatronic appeared with a piercing squeal.

“...?!” Seiya was taken aback.

The mouse’s face was twisted with malice; its eyes were blazing and bloodshot. Its lips were curled back, revealing fangs from which dangled the remains of an unfortunate foe.

《Filthy humans!》

《Kill them all!》

《We’ll cook you up at our leisure!》

The animatronic mice taunted Seiya in their warped, distorted voices. They were like monsters straight from the depths of Hell.

“See?” Moffle boasted. “Impressive, eh? And when you hit one with your laser pointer...” Moffle fired indiscriminately.

《Ergh... kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!》

The animatronic flew apart in an explosion of gore. Even for someone who knew that it was fake, it was still a disturbing sight.

“That’s how they die, fumo. But the biggest change is coming up. If you take too long to shoot all the naughty mice...”

《Vengeance for our fallen brothers! Diiiiiiie!!》

The animatronics began shooting some kind of liquid at them. Moffle quickly dodged, but Seiya took a surprise hit right to the face.

A sharp pain and irritating odor assaulted Seiya’s nose. “Gwuh?!” he exclaimed. “My... my eyes!”

As Seiya whipped around, clutching his face, Moffle swiftly dispatched the naughty rats. “...They’ll fight back with tear gas spray, fumo. The guns have transmitters in them, so they even know where to aim!”

“My eyes!” Seiya wailed. “Gwaaaaaaah!”

“Their reaction speed is pretty fast too, fumo. Naturally, this’ll be too hard for kids and seniors, so I included difficulty settings. Typically you’ll have Casual, Normal, and Hardcore tiers, fumo. But...”

“Raaagh!” Seiya cried. “My eyes... my eyes!”

“...I’ve also prepared ‘Insane’ mode for brave customers that just don’t find Hardcore enough of a challenge, fumo. Visitors who beat it get to enter the hall of fame. You get a “Soldier’s Honor” medal with a diamond inside of it, and we put up a gold plate inscribed with your name, fumo.” Muffle went on and on delightedly about the details of his planned renovation, ignoring Seiya’s screams of agony.

April Activity Report 2 (Macaron)

Before opening that day, Seiya went to check in on Macaron’s attraction. He’d never actually been to Macaron’s Music Theater before—it was constantly closed, which made it hard for it to do real business. That was going to be a real problem, of course, so he’d ordered Macaron not to take days off without permission anymore. The sheep mascot had grudgingly run his attraction ever since.

The general flow of Macaron’s Music Theater had guests board a large, 20-person gondola. It would travel between small rooms representing countries across the world, allowing guests to enjoy music associated with those countries.

This announcement played at the start: “Welcome to the boat of music, the Mezzo Porte! We’re going to share with you melodies from all over the world! Hold on tight, okay?”

In the room styled to look like Vienna, guests would enjoy the stirring sounds of Mozart; in the Istanbul room, they’d enjoy exotic flutes; in the Congo room, they’d enjoy passionate drumming. In Venice they’d enjoy Mendelssohn’s Boat Song; in Las Vegas, old rock classics; in Bali, a Gamelan ensemble would be playing. It was that sort of thing, introducing the audience to various musical styles.

Then in a final, fairy tale room, Macaron would appear and show off his magnificent flute skills. At least, that’s the way it had been.

“...But I don’t care about the flute at all, ron!” Macaron shouted, breaking in half a sort of fife whose name Seiya didn’t know offhand.

There were renovations being made here, too, so they were surrounded by staff—including part-time workers—running around busily. Chujo Shiina, the childish-looking high school student whom they’d ended up hiring, was dashing about here and there, helping Macaron out. Seiya still didn’t know much about her, but as long as she wasn’t causing trouble, he had no issue with her.

“Why do I have to teach those kids about Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*, ron?” the mascot raged. “He was great, sure, but he was a perv! You can’t really understand him unless you learn about his poop songs first, ron!”

“Er... I understand what you’re saying, but is this park really the

place for that?" Seiya gave a careful answer to the argumentative Macaron, whom he had met up with backstage.

"It should be! Even that God of Manga ate sushi off naked women during planning meetings! Art is vulgar and base, that's what makes it liberating!"

"I recognize your position on art," Seiya said delicately, "but what, exactly, is this particular attraction?"

Seiya and Macaron were currently in the first room the gondola visited. Normally this would be Vienna, resonating with a buoyant sonatina, but now it looked like a grimy American suburb. Some large men loitered on the porch, looking bored; they seemed to be drug dealers pushing cocaine. The sound of police sirens echoed faintly in the distance.

The music that was playing was bass-blaring gangsta rap. *Kill the police! Go to hell, GOP! Show me respect or you meet my AK!* went the lyrics. *I'm cool and I'll rule! Take control!*

"It's world music, ron!" Macaron argued persuasively. "It's not off-topic, ron!"

"That doesn't mean you should do it!" Seiya objected. "And what's with those bodybuilders? They're glaring at me."

"They're probably admiring your ass, Kanie-kun," the mascot explained.

"What?!"

"Just kidding. They're Mogutes, ron. "Go on," Macaron called out his instructions, "take them off! You're scaring the acting manager."

The men squirmed around a bit, then opened up, revealing a set of Mogutes a layer down. Seiya didn't know if they were employing body suits or what, but the illusion was genuinely impressive.

"Macaron-san," they asked, "is it okay for us to just hang around like this, mog?"

"Yeah. But if you see any hot babes among the guests, it's okay to leer and do some catcalling, ron."

"No, it's not!" Seiya objected.

"You studied the F-bomb, remember?" Macaron continued. "Make liberal use of that one. I wanna hear all kinds of *fucks* and *bitches*, ron!"

"I told you, no!" Seiya insisted.

April Activity Report 3 (Tiramii)

Seiya was grappling with a pile of documents in his bare-bones office when the old-fashioned phone on his desk suddenly rang. "Yes? Acting manager here," he answered, annoyed.

It was from the part-time greeter in the front plaza. "Emergency, Kanie-san! A cast member was stabbed!"

Give me a break! Seiya thought. He wanted to cry, but he stopped himself.

The person on the other end of the line was Bando Biino, whom he'd ended up hiring after she'd recovered and gotten out of the hospital. She was currently learning guest control by acting as a guide in the front plaza.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Calm down, then explain. Someone got stabbed? Who, and by whom?"

"Um... a guest did the stabbing," Bando told him. "They pulled out a Damascus steel knife and just swung it as hard as they could. It was so sudden, no one could stop them..."

"Who got stabbed?" Seiya asked patiently.

"Um, what was his name... the Pomeranian mascot, T... Ti... Tiramii-san!"

"Got it. I'm on my way." He slammed down the receiver and flew out of the office.

When he reached the front plaza, he found that things had already resolved. Several cast members were restraining a woman in her thirties, and a bloody knife lay on the ground a little ways away.

Tiramii was lying about five meters beyond, clutching his stomach. "Mii, mii..."

"H-Hey. Are you okay?" Seiya asked.

"No, mii," the mascot groaned. "I'm dying, mii..."

How many times had he seen Tiramii collapsed and bleeding now? Most people would never think to use "Fairy of Flowers" and "carnage" in the same sentence, and yet...

"Kanie-san! I'm so sorry that this happened... Even though I was here..." Biino clung to him, in tears.

Are you sure it wasn't your presence that caused it? he wondered. *What kind of theme park sees two people stabbed in such close succession?* All he could think was that this Bando Biino girl was under some kind of curse.

"...Anyway, I don't get it," Seiya commented. "Who's the culprit? Another of your relatives?"

"N-No, I don't know her..." Biino continued to dither around while the culprit strained against her holders and started shouting.

"I taught him a lesson!" the woman with disheveled black hair yelled. "All those flattering lies... 'you're the only one for mii!' You promised we'd be married! But you said that to all your women, didn't you? You mongrel!"

"I'd n-never say that, mii..." Tiramii whispered, still bleeding profusely. "Marriage is the one thing I don't want, mii... Besides I

don't remember any of this. Just who are you, mii?"

"You don't remember the hundreds of times we met in our dreams?!" asked the woman, scornfully. "You were always so kind. That's why I gave you all those presents! And this is how you repay me?!"

"I really don't know what you're talking about, mii..."

"You liar! I know you! Every morning I dress up and call out 'good morning,' but you just stand there in that picture frame and you never respond!" she fumed. "It's cruel. It's wrong! You need to pay! I need to kill you!"

"Mii..."

"...Take her away." At Seiya's order, the woman was led away.

Tiramii was still in a ball on the ground, but the wound didn't look fatal. Seiya ignored the panicking Biino and addressed him. "I think I see what's going on here. But let me ask you one thing: is what you said true? Is that woman just mentally ill?"

"...Yes, it's true. Mostly, mii."

"So there's a bit of a lie in there?" Seiya asked skeptically.

"Mii..."

"Tell me," he ordered.

"...Sorry. I did puff her once, mii..." Tiramii stuck his tongue out cutely from the middle of his pool of blood.

"I'm cutting your salary," Seiya sighed. "Also, you can lie there and die."

April Activity Report 4 (Isuzu)

There had been a bit of chaos that was beyond their control, but the cast still seemed to be working hard. They'd earned a stay of execution for a year, and some time to breathe easy, too.

Isuzu was enjoying their newfound breathing room. She hadn't felt any more of the annoyance or despair that had possessed her back in March, and she wasn't letting the foolishness of Moffle and the others get to her nearly as badly.

Is it just about time...? she wondered. It was 9:52 p.m. Isuzu stood in the entry hall of the administration building, checking the time. *Ah, there he is.*

Kanie Seiya got off the elevator and started walking towards the entrance, where she was standing. He was already in his civilian clothing, with a fashionable bag dangling from his shoulder.

"...Hey. I thought you'd already gone home," Seiya said as he noticed Isuzu.

"I had a little work to finish," she told him. "I was about to go." It

wasn't a lie. Of course, it was homework for school and not her park work...

Seiya began walking towards the bike rack, and Isuzu followed after him. The girls' dorm was in the same direction, so it was natural enough.



“That’s right,” he observed, “you live in the dorms?”

“Yes,” she answered, “It’s just a three minute walk away.”

“Hmm... convenient. Maybe I’ll get an apartment of my own...”

Seiya said, grumbling a bit. He often worked overtime and stayed overnight; he probably hated wasting time on the commute.

“I would recommend against it,” Isuzu told him. “The boys’ dorm is falling apart and a series of expansions has turned it into a maze.”

“Oh, really?”

“...Besides, won’t your aunt be worried if you start living in a dorm?”

Seiya laughed with a wince. “I doubt it. She’s barely ever home, thanks to her editing job. To be honest, I haven’t even seen her this week. The only way I know she’s even coming home to get changed is the fact that there’s more laundry in the basket.”

“I see.” She knew that Seiya’s family situation was a bit complicated. His parents were alive, but divorced, and he wasn’t in regular contact with either of them. “...Not to pass judgment on your lifestyle, but it’s not exactly commendable. You subsist on convenience store lunches and packaged meals, don’t you? You should eat more healthily.”

“What can I do?” he shrugged. “I don’t have the time.”

“Nothing, I suppose, but...” Once she got back, maybe she’d search the Internet for cooking sites. Would he find it strange if she brought him a homemade lunch? Well, she was his secretary, after all. But then, it might come off as being overly meddling...

They arrived at the bicycle lot. Seiya’s bicycle was a worn-out city bike, rusted here and there. He tossed his bag in the basket and swiftly removed the combination lock. It was just there to hold the chain on, so he didn’t even have to turn the dial; that was very much like him.

“By the way,” he asked, “what’s going on with the Mogute Clan?”

“They seem to have blended in quickly,” Isuzu told him. “I haven’t heard of any problems.”

The Mogutes’ claims that they were master carpenters had turned out to be true. In just a few days, they’d already dug another underground complex at the edge of the first park and built their own dorm there. They’d reused the building materials from their old den, so there was almost no budget required.

“They seem useful,” he commented.

“Yes,” she agreed. “I think they can contribute to the park’s renovation.”

Construction speed like theirs would be a huge help. Of course, renewing the structures would require money, but they had a little financial leeway for now. The weather was going to warm up soon—

now was the time to go on the offensive.

“We have to bring in a lot of guests,” she remarked.

“Yes. A lot of... a lot of guests.” Seiya’s voice turned dark.

During the sale of the second park, one thing had come up that Seiya hadn’t accounted for. Contrary to expectations, Amagi Development had strongly opposed the sale. He’d fought tenaciously, but in the end, he’d been forced into a contract revision with one extremely harsh condition: a massive increase in the yearly attendance requirement.

In previous years, they had only needed to draw in 600,000 people per year. But starting this year, that would change.

“Three million people...” he mused. “Will we really be able to get them all?”

Afterword

I finished volume two of Amagi Brilliant Park six months after volume one. I'd hoped to make it more like four, but I just couldn't pick up the pace. Hmm, too bad. Next time! Next time!

This time around, we had two main stories. For the first story, I just crammed in multiple elements, and I sort of worked it out as I went along without organizing the plot too much. I think it works fairly well as it is, but it was quite difficult, so I think I want to put a bit more planning into the story in the future. I've reached that conclusion as of today.

They've made it into the new year, but the park still has all kinds of problems. If they wanted any time for day-to-day shenanigans, first they had to work out the money and other problems... so of course, Seiya-kun's life is as hard as ever. In the third volume they can take a breather with a little more silliness, I think.

There are other areas besides Sorcerer's Hill where Moffle and the others work, and I have a lot of other odd characters to play with there. I haven't had time to introduce them yet, but I plan to start rolling them out soon.

There's just so much I want to do, I don't know where to start!

By the way, this February, as part of the first volume's marketing campaign, I had signing events in Kobe and Hiroshima. The Hiroshima event was in a bookstore in a certain shopping mall... and wow! That mall was big! It looked just like that famous zombie game.

It was around that time that I was thinking about what to do with AmaBri's second park (the empty land), so that signing venue gave me a hint about how to resolve that. Thank you to everyone involved!

The okonomiyaki in Hiroshima is really good, too. I'm embarrassed to admit that I've only ever had "Hiroshima-style" okonomiyaki in Tokyo, so it really did shock me.

Thanks to you all, AmaBri volume one had huge sales. I think it had more to do with my PR director's hard work and Nakajima Yukasan's popularity more so than my own skills, but anyway, I'm really, really happy, and I can't thank everyone enough. I was also encouraged to see us pull in readers who hadn't read my past works. Thank you very much. I'll continue to work as hard as I can.

Um, I think I still have two pages left to fill (the standard complaint).

What about things I've been up to?

Hmm. Lately my addiction to Gunpla has spiked, and I even set up a coloring table so I could use a sprayer and an airbrush. I'm pretty awful at it, though... I try using masking tape to make the colors really clean, but when I drink while I'm coloring, it always ends up in tragedy. Sorry, I'm sure no one cares.

In terms of games, I've been playing *The Last of Us*. I love zombie road movies. I've always wanted to write a zombie novel myself.

Oh, and the *Full Metal Panic!* anime Blu-ray box is coming out, so I need to start scripting a drama CD extra. But it's been so long that I've forgotten the voices for Sosuke and Kaname, which is a problem. Well, I'll figure it out, I'm sure. Go, me! Go!

I also participated in a replay of the TRPG Granquest, put out by Fujimi Shobo. I think it's been seventeen or eighteen years since I did a game replay. Mizuno Ryo-sensei's novel will be released at the same time as this second volume, so please buy that, too.

A lot of different people's efforts went into making this book happen. Thanks to my illustrator Nakajima Yuka-sama and everyone else.

I want to work hard on the third volume and get it out soon. Let's beat the heat and keep going! ...Anyway, I should wrap up. See you later!

Shouji Gatou
July 2013

Celebrating the release
of Amagi Brilliant Park
Volume 2
by Nakajima Yuka

"I feel like I'm
always being
placed in this
role..."

Pandering Bikini Armor
(requested by editor M-san)
Hero has appeared!
What do you do?

Thank you for reading!
08/2013 Nakajima Yuka



Bonus Food Glossary

Volume 2 of Amagi Brilliant Park introduces us to the horrors of the park cafeteria, and sees Seiya rewarded for his dubious ladder-climbing with a treat from a company president. Below, we'll talk a little bit about the origins of some of these dishes and give you some simple ways to make them at home. Hopefully you'll have a better time than Isuzu did, at least...

Gyudon Recipe

Gyudon, also called “beef bowl,” is a popular Japanese comfort food. It dates back to the Meiji Era of the late 1800s, when beef grew in popularity as part of the country's renewed interest in Western things. The dish became so popular that today, there are entire fast food chains devoted to it.

Each bowl has 3 layers: the first is rice, the second is beef and vegetables (usually onion), and the third is an optional egg with sliced scallions. Keep some pickled ginger on the side to lighten up the thick, rich experience!

- 1 small onion, diced
- 1/2 cup broth made from hondashi
- 1/4 cup dry sake
- 2 TBSP soy sauce
- 1 TBSP mirin
- 1 TSP sugar
- 1/2 lb thinly shaved beef steak
- 1 TSP fresh ginger
- 2 cups cooked rice
- 2 poached eggs
- diced scallions

Directions

1. Combine the first six ingredients in a medium saucepan, bringing to a simmer over medium heat. Cook 5 minutes, stirring regularly, or until onion is softened.
2. Add beef and cook, stirring regularly for 5 minutes, or until beef

- is cooked through and the broth has reduced. Stir in ginger, and cook for 1 more minute. Season with salt and sugar to taste.
3. Divide rice between two bowls, and top with beef mixture. Finish with 1 egg per bowl, and a handful of diced scallions.

Ginger Pork Recipe

Despite the title ingredients sounding more like Chinese food, ginger pork (shogayaki) is a home-grown Japanese favorite. It came about in the early 20th century, after the Great Kanto Earthquake devastated Tokyo and the people turned to pork as a cheaper source of meat that families could even raise themselves.

This ginger pork is cooked as a quick sauté, and served in bite size pieces. It pairs well with a side of vegetables and rice, but the same treatment can be used to prepare whole pork chops and chicken for grilling.

- 1 TBSP fresh grated ginger
- 2 TBSP soy sauce
- 2 TBSP sake
- 2 TBSP mirin
- 1 lb thinly sliced pork loin
- 3 TBSP vegetable oil

Directions

1. In a large bowl, combine the first 4 ingredients and mix thoroughly. Add the pork and stir to coat. Cover and refrigerate, leaving pork to marinate for 1 hour.
2. Heat oil in a skillet over high heat. Add the pork, and fry quickly using high heat until the meat is brown and crispy. Discard the leftover marinade.

Spaghetti Napolitan

(serves 4)

First created by Chef Shigetada Irie in Yokohama, Japan, shortly after WWII, Spaghetti Napolitan was inspired by the foods being eaten by the U.S. troops. Today it's a common "light meal," often served in cafes and family restaurants.

Spaghetti Napolitan consists of ham or sausage that are then sautéed with onion and bell pepper, before adding noodles and

ketchup. Like many Japanese takes on Western food, the ingredients create a sweeter flavor profile than is typical for American takes on the dish. It's best seasoned with salt and pepper, but feel free to add tabasco sauce at the end if you like a little spice!

- 400 g dry spaghetti (about 1/4 of a package)
- 1 smoked sausage, sliced into bite size pieces
- 1 onion, diced
- 1/2 green bell pepper, thinly sliced
- 2 TBSP oil
- 1/4 cup ketchup
- salt
- parsley
- parmesan cheese
- optional garnish: tabasco sauce

Directions

1. Cook spaghetti according to package instructions and set aside to drain.
2. Heat a frying pan on medium high heat. Add sausage, onion, and green bell pepper. Cook for 2 to 3 minutes, or until the onion is translucent and fragrant.
3. Add cooked spaghetti, and stir fry for 1 minute. Take off of heat and add ketchup.
4. Divide pasta between 4 bowls. Garnish with salt, parsley, and parmesan cheese according to taste.



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by Shouji Gatou

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